

Boris Karner
PROVIDENCE BAY ○

*Short stories
and novelettes*



2015

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Writers of Saint Petersburg

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"Let Us Entrust Ourselves to Providence!"

I would like to start my review dedicated to Boris Kornev's "Providence Bay" with the most unusual story in the book – a story called "All at home!"; unusual, if anything, for this collection, and also for the world of literature in general. Do you know a lot of books written on behalf of a usual domestic pet, being not a fable or allegoric Aesop-style story? We all (dog lovers!) know a dog's intellect is equal to the human mind of three, four or maybe even five-year-old child. Therefore, if there are stories written on behalf of small children, why not display a dog's view of the world? A genuine novelist is always keen on getting into someone else's skin; seeing life through someone else's eyes. This desire can take such a form, why not?

But let us turn to the very sense of the story. Its nameless character, a well-mannered home-bred doggie, tells us of an unexpected turn in his life: the owner brought home a little wayward dog. Anyone who knows animals could confirm that such an event is a serious test for your pet; you need quite a long time for the new house-mates to accept each other, build a hierarchy of relations and learn to live in a new way. It is not necessarily that everything ends well.

Actually, the story "All at home!" is exactly about that – getting used to the new situation, an attempt to fit in an unexpected twist of fate, a difficult dialogue with Providence, so it is unclear who says the last word.

Providence looks like the theological concept, but somehow you don't hear it so often from the believers. The word is rather reminiscent of our favourite childhood novels of Jules Verne, Mayne Reid, etc. The phrases from these books ring a bell, "The ship is riding onto

the rocks! – The captain screamed in a sonorous voice. – There is no hope of salvation, we must entrust ourselves to Providence!” Yes, Jules Verne loved remembering Providence in season and out of season. That’s why our memory keeps the word in the same place where monsoons and trade winds, rocks, reefs, storms, astrolabes, sextants and other adventure equipment are stocked. So when you see the Providence Bay on the map, you have no doubts that in a place like that the characters of the popular books do feel at home, there are plenty of tornadoes, tenth waves, sharks, whales, treacherous reefs and uninhabited islands.

However, grown-ups have their own adventures, and a new Jules Verne need to tell us about them adequately. Many of us sometimes repeat the remarkable phrase, “... we must entrust ourselves to Providence!”

This phrase explicitly or implicitly sounds in each of the short stories in Boris Kornev’s collection “Providence Bay”. With the old authors Providence usually favors the heroes, at the last moment getting them out of the most hopeless situations.

What can we see in the book of the contemporary author? The first novelette “One for All...” depicts events of the Great Patriotic War. Two teenagers are being taken to Germany. On the way there, to avoid invaders’ slavery, they join the Russian Liberation Army. At the first opportunity the boys run through the front line to their troops. One of them is killed in a shoot-out; the second boy is captured as a traitor...

There is the story “Mistake Corrections”. Four boys at night climbed into the staff room to steal the teacher’s grade book. At the most crucial moment of the “operation” they heard footsteps in the corridor and the technology teacher entered the room. Taking advantage of the darkness, two boys managed to jump out of the window on the branches of a tree growing nearby, and the other

two hid in the closet. The first of the “criminals” successfully descended to the ground, but the second one got caught on a branch and hung at a great height, risking about to fall off. Without thinking for long, the old teacher rushed to his rescue...

“An Orange Sea” tells about the beginning of the Abkhaz war. Georgian soldiers burst into Sukhumi, and cruel sadistic violence towards the civilian population begins. A pregnant woman, trying to escape the murderers, together with others Russian refugees, climbs into a barge full of oranges in the port. The barge is leaving the dock just when the Georgian artillery opens fire on it...

“Simply Maria” is a story about a girl who travelled abroad to get a decent job in Europe but against her will she found herself in a low-grade Amsterdam brothel. After a few days of hell, she decided to escape...

Afghan war breaks out (“Documentation Management Manual”). The adviser from the USSR and his assistant come under fire...

As you can see, trustful surrender to Providence would not be superfluous for Kornev’s heroes. In each story, there is a narrative pause, moment of unstable equilibrium, when the fate pendulum rises to its peak, and nobody knows where it stops and in what direction it swings.

Boris Kornev is a specialist in the sphere of economy and crisis management, author of many publications. He has thoroughly studied that strange state, when fate asks its question, and everyone should give (sometimes immediately) a plausible answer. In such cases the outside world meets you face to face, and your own life confronts you suddenly showing who the boss is. It seems to you that you yourself create your path and can manage with its ups and downs, but your life unexpectedly doesn’t obey you. Not only mortal danger turns into unpredicta-

ble twist of fortune, but other things quite opposite in its meaning can change the character of events. Suppose it is unexpected love that alters you and requires activity, actions, determination.

Otherwise, it can also lead to death. This is what the story "Last Drops of Rain" is about. Providence gave love to Anton and Katya. They played with this wonderful gift for a while, but then... Then they decided it was too expensive, too wasteful, it could change dramatically their normal lifestyle. Wouldn't it be better to choose a straight road instead of negotiating a sharp turning? As a result of the cautious attitude towards life, He dies physically, and She, one can say, loses her destiny and individuality... You can overcome Providence, you can entrust yourself to Providence, but you cannot hide or get away from it.

In many ways, we see a similar situation in the story "Chapter One". Every novelist knows starting of a new novel is similar to a new turn in the biography. If we refer to the book seriously, it changes lives, and not only author's life. Of course if the writer is able to take it on. The main character of the "Chapter One" was not able to resist the challenge and he was gone. It is the last story of the book, and this is no accident. Such literary device was not chosen at random.

Let's talk about how the stories of "Providence Bay" are interweaving. The first and most obvious "junction" of the plots is a cycle of stories "Mistake Corrections" - "Providence Bay" - "Meeting" - "Cup of Tea" - "Documentation Management Manual". As a matter of fact, this cycle with the same heroes can be called a novelette.

The four teenagers, hapless thieves of the teacher's grade book, are not forgotten by the author on completing the first of the stories; he traces their fate further into adulthood and prepares their accidental meetings - fateful, "providential" meetings. The curious thing is that those two boys, who managed (lucky or unlucky for

them) to get out of the staff room, would be social outcasts, they kind of jump out of the Soviet system as if from a school window; one becomes a bandit, the other a dissident. They meet in a penal colony when they, like two minuses in mathematics, touch and form a plus, return each other to life and give each other hope for the future. The other two boys, who had not managed to leave the staff room, do not leave the system, incorporating into its tight, seemingly unshakable, embrace; one developed into a polar scientist (after that, a party functionary), the second becomes a KGB officer. They also meet – in Afghanistan, together look death in the face, stay alive, but... This happy ending for some reason does not seem so reassuring, as is the case of the first two characters. We get an impression that in spite of mathematics, plus by plus give here a zero, if not a minus, the provident meeting ended in nothing. The contradistinction of the two pairs does not seem to the reader to be deliberate or intentional: Boris Kornev is far from artificiality and affectation, his narrative seems documentary, excluding any conceptual liberties. But concepts are born of strict adherence to realism; in fact the reality around us is extremely rich in hidden meanings.

The logical centre of the cycle (and the book in general) is the story “Providence Bay”. Taken separately, it is just a concise, expertly written essay on the work of Soviet polar scientists. In the context of the collection it seems the epicenter of all narratives, a kind of eye of the cyclone. Providence Bay out of a geographical concept becomes almost a mystical essence.

Everyone knows, the Arctic is a “weather kitchen” for the entire planet, Kornev considers it a “fate kitchen” for his heroes, where the providential whirlwinds come into being for all stories of the collection. This is the chaos from which all things are born. Frosts, cold weather, snow are the dominant background for most of the

stories. An episode in December woods ("One for All") comes to mind, when two boys are trying to escape from Germans; the story "Being Both a Judge and an Executioner" takes place in winter of 1942-43; "Cup of Tea" – also in winter; "Mistake Corrections" – on a cold March night. The winter is present in the story "All at Home!", it is guessed in a taiga landscape of "Meeting", in a cold top of Mont Blanc ("Last Drops of Rain")... The heat of Abkhazia ("An Orange Sea") and Kandahar ("Documentation Management Manual") emphasizes the polar cold reigning in the book. The frost of "Providence Bay", the "fate kitchen", breathes on each of its pages. One modern guru advised his adherents, "The cold can also warm; you just have to be able to take the heat out of it!" Boris Kornev seems to apply this paradox into life.

As already mentioned, the last story of the collection is called "Chapter One". What is more, the words "Chapter One" are the last words of the book. The main character, an unfortunate writer, is unable to cope with the vagaries of inspiration and dies at his desk, having written on a clean sheet of paper only these sacramental words. All his life happened to have been just a prologue and we don't know the plot of the first chapter: we still can't read the code; we can't understand the posthumous message of fate. But here, in real life, the same story takes place: we call the deliverance from impending death a second birthday, i.e. another first chapter of our life. Every new twist of fate, any gift of Providence, no matter how many of them there have been before, opens the first chapter in our destiny: everything is being written again, everything starts afresh.

Vladimir Alekseyev

Samsara Wheel and Russian Expanses

This is the plot in short of Boris Kornev's novel "One for All...": during the Great Patriotic War a Russian village is occupied by the Germans. Three youngsters – Petya, Vasya and his sister Zina – are trying to find a way to survive. Zina is taken to Germany. The boys fail to find guerillas and soon find themselves in a carriage of Ostarbeiters. Being afraid to die of hunger and in order to join the Soviet troops, they sign up to the Russian Liberation Army of general Vlasov (that's why its soldiers are called Vlasovtsy, or Vlasovites), supervised by Nazi. When a chance to escape arises, the boys run, but Petya gets killed and Vasya is marked as a traitor. He is sent to a detention camp. After the war the brother and sister meet and in spite of everything they have been through, they try to adjust to their new life... That is it.

As usual, the short retelling cannot convey the most important things. From the previous paragraph you might understand that the story again (for the nth time in recent years) makes the reader get horrified with injustice reigning "under Stalin's regime", feel sorry for the traitors – "They were fighting against totalitarianism!" – "You cannot treat all people the same", and so on. A Soviet camp, unsettled postwar life – all this is now seen as yesterday's literature. Nowadays, to make a favourable impression on the reader "weary of democracy", the writer must praise both the Soviet era and Stalin himself. Hence the story "One for All..." goes against the reader's expectations. Does it? Or maybe Boris Kornev is not "pro" and not "contra", maybe he talks about different things and his story is somewhat different? Let's take a close look at it.

There was time when the entire Soviet people, as one man, passionately longed for liberation from the shackles of socialism, for the free enterprise society, democracy and freedom. At the same time, each of us, half-educated dreamers, was adamant that in capitalist Russia he would become if not a Rothschild then at least an owner of a villa, a yacht and a couple of "Mercedes" for sure. People believed that democracy would not make everyone a president but it would certainly allow each person to influence at least the local authorities. It came as a big surprise for many that in a society where there were the rich, there would necessarily be the poor and that there would be more paupers than money-bags, so it is very unlikely to become rich tomorrow.

And then, not without some preliminary squeak, our dreams turned to another era: to developed socialism and Stalin's socialism. At present everyone keeps saying that it was a society of genuine prosperity, true justice, brotherhood and camaraderie. There was of course an apparatus of repression, but the number of its victims was significantly overstated by the current propaganda, and if there were victims, they were to blame for their sad fate themselves: it served them right! Surely if new Stalin comes, then why would we be on the other side of the barbed wire? It just won't happen because... because... it will never happen! Even if we don't talk of the barbed wire, but talk of our modest trivial civil and legal problems, – how can they have anything to do with us, honest workers, devoted to the idea and comrade N in person? It can never happen! This time there will be no surprises!

However, surprising is the fate's main function. And it does not actually matter what political system it is: developed socialism, triumphant liberalism or maybe traditional monarchism, – fate does not pay attention to such little things. Its wheel still rolls over the open spaces of the USSR, bumps of the Russian Federation or any oth-

er roads, – woe betide anyone who gets in its way. Even though there are usually quite a lot of people who do – heroes, idiots or simply careless bunglers (the latter constitute a majority). This is what Boris Kornev's story actually demonstrates. Who is its main character? Petka? Vaska? Zinka? Not at all! They are just the consumable items for History. The main character is Fate. Just like in ancient tragedy. Did the Soviet boys Petya and Vasya dream of overthrowing the hated Stalin's yoke, or of entering Moscow in the ranks of glorious Liberation Army, confirming the kingdom of freedom? Nothing like that. Both Petya and Vasya dreamed of the things all Soviet children of the war time did. They were genuinely eager to get to the front; they made a lot of efforts for this, but all in vain.

Nothing helped! The police goons, Germans, the terrible mortal train and in front of them death of hunger and cold, or hopeless slavery under the dominion of the so called master race. The boys are good, upright persons, they just want to survive; they want to join the Red Army in order to fight the fascists... So, they join the Russian Liberation Army (RLA) and without making a single shot, they try to escape and cross the front line. This illusion let down a lot of people. The RLA is believed to have consisted only of malicious people with anti-Soviet genetic code, the kulaks and the bourgeoisie, ideological fighters... Not likely! The main part of it was dumb, indifferent people who didn't care what uniform they were to respect and who only cared about their grub.

The big part of RLA soldiers were those who decided to take a time-out. They thought, "I don't want to die. I am going to eat, sleep and recover in the German camp and then go back to the 'ours'!" (If you don't believe this, I have the numbers).

Not many managed to return. Those who did were not pleased. Vasya and Petya were among those. The boys came from under the pen of Kornev as very nice,

charming, and even heroic. Heroic – it is not a joke! In their native village, occupied by Germans, they try to find partisans, they escape from police goons and even on the death train they don't get depressed and don't give up – they seek for a chance to get revenge. So they run away from the RLA and cross the front line...

This is what the Russian heroes are about – you have got to admit that Kornev skillfully follows Tolstoy's (and generally speaking Russian literary) tradition: he convincingly portrays the heroism without pose or phrases, that is, heroism itself. Exactly the same hero boys as the main characters of the novel won the war, they broke the back of the fascist beast, – the same but with more luck than those who have caught the eye of Fate. As the great Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides teach, even titans are unable to cope with the Fate! Why, the gods themselves are unable to cope! Interestingly, the characters of the story are clearly feeling the gaze of Fate, they see that despite their efforts, something is not right, so trying to understand what is happening to them, Petya pronounces, "Good things never happen on their own. Something will always spoil them". This phrase becomes the keynote of the story; it is repeated several times in different circumstances.

However, it is curious that all good things in Kornev's story are created by the characters themselves, they come out of their souls, and the nasty things come from the outside, they are given by Fate, like a brick put by naturalist in front of an ant on its way to the ant-hill.

The ancient tragedy characters used to die fighting against their fate. So did Petya... He didn't manage to cross the front line... Kornev is not a stylized ancient Greek, he just writes a simple (by the standards of the twentieth century) story of the lives of ordinary Russian people. But in real life it happens very often that you have been run over by the wheel of fate and you are still alive:

a different kind of battle begins as a battle for yourself, for having to relearn how to stand on your feet. This is what the second part of the story is about. Here not just Vasya, who stayed alive but found himself in the camp as a Vlasov volunteer, learns to walk again, but his sister Zinaida, who has also been an Ostarbeiter, dishonored and trampled, is trying her best to get out of the mess, though she was grinded by the mill of fate. It is significant that they manage to do it! They do overall, with losses and nasty wounds, but they do! As Zinaida says to her brother, "Don't be silly, Vasiliy! The only thing blokes can't get through is alcoholism... The rest is nonsense, things will end up alright!"

To overcome all your troubles – what a strong soul one should have... This kind of heroism cannot cause jealousy of youngsters, but nowadays we lack great characters. Do you know what analogy of Kornev's story is? Don't be surprised – it is the famous "Tale of a True Man" written by Boris Polevoy. In general, it is the same story about a man ruthlessly and indifferently crushed by fate, but he managed (literally!) to rise back on his feet. However, the difference is that if the pilot Maresiev crushed his legs, the ground itself is crushed under the feet of Vasiliy and Zinaida. If the pilot finds the strength to return crawling to the front line, into the camp of heroes, the brother and sister had to return to the ranks of ordinary people, normal people... Strange though it may seem, their return is much more difficult.

In fact, the story is not long – we have already retold it and paid attention to everything we wanted the reader to give thought to. However, there is one more important hero in the story who might even be considered too literary, made-up, even factitious. It is a German soldier, named Gunter, an ex-student of botany. The young man is not an antifascist but he is not clinging to Nazism either. In his parents' house in Leipzig there works an Ostarbe-

iter Zinaida (the student even falls in love with Russian housemaid), later Gunter, as a war prisoner, gets into the same Soviet camp where Vasiliy is. "What a coincidence!" No, it is not. The writer who professes the principles of realism has to describe only the visible world as it should be in the realist literature. Meanwhile, the invisible world, too, requires to be shown, and none of us is a stranger to its influence. The genuine realist can sense the angels fly, but not every writer would introduce them to their books. This is how the reader gets Tolstoy's Platon Karatayev ("War and Peace"), Dostoyevsky's Sonia Marmeladova ("Crime and Punishment") or Turgenev's Lukeria ("The Living Relics") – it seems that they don't break the realistic narration but at the same time they are not earthy creatures but angels described in Aesop language. Gunter is one of them. A sensitive and compassionate reader will not believe in the vitality of characters if there is no masked angel next to them: one feels the necessity of the divine support. I would like to remind you the words of Viacheslav Khodasevich:

*And from the cool heights
Throw a single feather to me,
Let it fall on my burnt chest
Like a little snowflake...*

Gunter grants both Zinaida and Vasiliy with such feathers and its angelic coolness gives them strength to live in the heat of the twentieth century.

I would like to finish with the first episode of the novellette: it is a memorable year of 1975, 30th anniversary of Victory; the guests are celebrating in the garden "with tears in their eyes". Vasiliy is one of them. After having drunk and eaten, after having listened to Okudzhava's song about an assault battalion many-many times, the men start beating Vasiliy up, "As a sinister ritual, they punch him heavily with their fists, trying to hit his face. They are punching him and crying at the same time..." They beat him up as

a traitor – thinking that they fought as “normal” people but he... This is the way they understand their “ritual of a fight”. In fact they just sense him standing beyond. Having been run over by the wheel of Samsara, Vasiliy survived and returned back to life. They think that he would never be “normal” and “ordinary” again.

Alexey Bakulin

Writers of Saint Petersburg about Boris Kornev's Works

Everything Boris Kornev takes up doesn't just have a real basis, but it has been studied thoroughly, which is especially rare in modern literature. One can sense right away that the material has been investigated much deeper than it is revealed in the book. The 150 pages of the story “The Real Four” are full of rich and exciting life of four classmates – a party functionary, a dissident, a bandit and a KGB-man. Life – in four different ways – has flown by as fast as in reality. Indeed, the book is very real.

Alexey Akhmatov

The pages of “Tandem” smell of a bad wind of that era, the great (or miserable?) one. First of all, I'd like to say its deadly greatness has been expressed very well in Kornev's novel. Not only the “spirit of time” has been captured (we sense it so vividly!) but the whole panorama is depicted, which another author would drag out for two big volumes. Here there are only a couple hundred of pages and no one complains of the lapidary style, unnecessary brevity. It is accurate and concise. The action

gracefully flits through the years and space, and captures the sunset of the Soviets, perestroika and further more; from Russia it transfers to France, Holland and even to Brazil... The reader visits Abkhazia in its bloodiest days, merry quarters of Amsterdam and the corridors of power.

Alexey Bakulin

Boris Kornev, the author of "The Daltonian", combining together momentary emotional states and longer-term moods depicts world-view of the main character, an officer of the Red Army, shows the reader all contradictions of the wartime life, where silly, cowardly and heroic acts were mixed together. Boris Kornev is trying to comprehend, understand the reasons for collaboration with the enemy in the occupied villages, causes of the guerilla unit's foundation. Why hundreds and hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war were declared public enemies, and in fact why they had no hope to get the help of the army. The novel is devoted to the generation of author's father. The beauty of the story is rooted in an interesting plot and the accuracy of the composition. The book is so talented!

Vladimir Yershov

In the centre of the story "The Real Four" of Boris Kornev is placed the fate of four school friends. The author does not play a role of an outside observer. He blends in with them so much that we get a feeling of his direct participation, as if he is talking to us from the book pages. The characters jumping up from the writer's pen, are colourful and prominent, their fates touch our souls very deeply. The palette of the author's talent is enriched with indelible school impressions (first ups and downs, first marks, first love...). It is not difficult to say something

smart and honest – a great deal has been said and written. However, it is very hard to make the truth penetrate the reader's soul – that is not given to every author. The story of B. Kornev does not leave the reader indifferent.

Margarita Bozhenkova

In "The Daltonian" B. Kornev aims not only to describe the hard days of 1941 – retreat and invasion, the writer tries to explore what is going on, first of all, in the soul of a 27-year-old Astakhov when he is taken prisoner, when he sees betrayal and cowardice... The author succeeds to disclose the nature of his character from the "inside", to explain the evolution of his mentality.

Yury Tuysk

Boris Kornev immerses the reader in a serious reflection from the very first pages. His characters are not passive observers. They are courageous, intelligent; they bless the reader with energy and love of truth.

Alexander Gostomyslov

Editor's note

The reader should bear in mind that Russian names are often formed with the help of diminutive suffixes. You can meet one and the same name in many variants: Zinaida – Zina, Zinka; Vasiliy – Vasya, Vaska; Piotr – Petya, Petka; Vladimir – Vovka; Sergey – Serega, Serezha; Elena – Lenushka; etc

"One for All..."

Loud music can be heard from the loudspeakers in the centre of a coastal town. It is echoing many times through the walls of five-storey blocks of flats and its dissonance is reaching even the outskirts. There, on the gulf coast, is an old wooden house and between the young birch-trees, turning green, there is a laid table. In the middle of it there are bottles of vodka "Stolichnaya" and lemonade. Next to them there is a bowl of Russian salad and a dish of jellied meat. All over the table there are small dishes of sliced suet, garlic cloves, slices of herring sprinkled with oil and scattered with onion rings. At the table there are seven people.

Every year on the 9th of May the smartly dressed men and women get together. Today they are sitting at the table, having a drink, eating and proposing simple toasts. They celebrate the 30th anniversary of Victory, the greatest joy they must have got in their lives. Well, maybe, Gagarin as well... He also deserves a toast. In the house the record-player plays the same song and each of the seven people repeats its words, "We need only one victory, one for all, no matter what it's worth..."

The three men sitting at the table have shiny medals and even an order on the lapels of their blazers. The one with the order is older than the others, half of his face is brown and covered with wrinkles and looks like a big birthmark, and one of his eyes is damaged and can hardly see. He used to be a tank driver. He was caught in a fire

twice in his tank, he fell under the ice, bumped off three "Tigers" and reached as far as Prague during the war.

The second veteran returned from the war as early as 1942 on crutches and without a leg. His plane with landing troops had been put out of action and caught on fire just to the west of Vyazma, the paratroopers had jumped out. But he had happened to descend to a German trench. His only choice was to fire a grenade down...

The third man has also been at war. In the last days of the war, he used to be a sea cadet on a ship in the Gulf of Finland. His chest was covered with badges and of course with a medal for Victory over Germany.

Having drunk vodka and eaten, the men get up at last and leave the table to have a smoke. The women clear the table and prepare everything for tea – they put a samovar on the table, bring crusty egg and cabbage pasties out from the oven. They all know that three pasties contain secret chocolates as usual. They will bring luck to the ones who find them. While standing up, the men drink from shot glasses... and suddenly start beating up the fourth man. As a sinister ritual, they punch him heavily with their fists, trying to hit his face. They are punching him and crying at the same time.

1.

In May of 1941 Vasiliy turned twelve. The school year was coming to its end. Skipping their last lessons, he and his school friend Petka used to run to the bank of the Plyussa. They were always covered in grazes, with shaggy hair, and were wearing ragged trousers and odd-coloured jerseys. They would cast the line and sit in a boat till late at night, fanning away mosquitoes, and staring at hand-made floats sticking over the glass-like water. Then they would climb on a steep sandy bank through the hazel grove to look down at their village,

winding river and dark blue forest. They were looking and dreaming of growing up and flying to the North Pole and then, many years later, coming back to those toy-like houses with grey roofs made of discoloured slats. Usually Petka would search for his house from afar, then Vaska's, and later they would argue where the railway or rail station was...

By the night time the sun was unwillingly falling behind the edge of the woods, the sky on the horizon was looking like fresh rust and in front of the horizon, in the new fir wood, in the light wind there was the gleaming and flickering of the going day which looked like dying fire flames. The boys would go home.

Vaska's parents had died three years before. That spring they were trying to get to the other bank of the river in the flood and both had been pulled out into the fast water. They had been found a month later. Petka had never seen his father and he took offence at his mother for bringing him as a seven year old child to the village to his nan's and leaving him there for ever. She went to live in Leningrad to her new family. Vaska was not alone – he had sisters. Katerina and Alexandra were grown-ups, at the end of the 1930s they got married, settled in Luga and got into accounting college. Zina was only five years older than her brother, she stayed in the village and was like a mother to Vaska. They lived in their parents' house, kept their home and vegetable garden, picked up berries, mushrooms, various herbs, dried them and sold them to a consumers co-operative society.

At school Vaska was considered bright but stubborn and naughty. By the time he was twelve he had grown to one meter and seventy centimetres tall so he looked older than he was. Everybody said he was the dead spit of Zinka. He had the same big and hazel eyes but unlike her warm velvet sight, in his round, nearly black eyes there would always be a mischievous twinkle. Petka was dif-

ferent – blue-eyed and blonde, he was growing as a quiet and well-behaved child, but he was still quite short.

Soon a war began. On the second day servicemen came to their village from the regional centre. They lined up everyone liable for military service near the club and a young commanding officer with crimson button holes and a medal on his chest made a short speech. When he was talking, he waved his fist as if he was threatening the enemies, then he got his black pistol out of the holster for the sake of good order. After him an old man with a beard, the village blacksmith, made a speech, he had fought the Germans in 1915. The serious and gloomy seers off were standing silently nearby. When the men took seats on the benches of the lorry, the women burst out crying at the same time. The village boys stood in the same line as the men during the meeting and after that they ran after the lorry until it disappeared behind the corner.

That very day, after considering everything, Vaska and Petka decided they could not stay at home when their Motherland was in danger. They got a piece of bread, an onion, put some salt in a piece of cloth, put their packets in their bosoms and went off to the front. Two days later militiamen got them on a train and took them back to their village, luckily, the railway station was nearby.

Zina was telling off her brother for a long time then. But a week later the boys ran away again. They were caught. Zina kept telling him off, crying and asking him not to be silly, but to help her and the country there, working in the collective farm. Vasiliy hung his head and looked at his sister frowningly. He knew he was upsetting her but deep down he was glad. Sure! This time they had managed to go much further.

Soon the front-line came nearer. The Germans broke into their village. The new power was enforcing the new system: burgomasters, wardens, police goons, orders, executions... If something wrong happened in the village –

someone came from the woods and stocked up on food or unknown people exploded something, set afire or killed German soldiers – it was followed by cruel punishment immediately. And it was not the Germans who did it. It was mostly local police goons.

The boys were at it again. Since they failed to join the army, they just had to set something afire! For instance, an old club with a Nazi flag on the roof or a board near the well with notices of executions and flogs. They failed to do both of them. The first time they found diesel oil instead of petrol and it wouldn't flame up, they just wasted all their matches. The second time Petka overslept. Thank God! Because the whole village with its people would have been burnt as punishment.

In the winter of 1942 Zina was taken away to Germany for compulsory labour. Petka's nan took Vasya to stay with them. Nothing happened in the next eighteen months after that. There was gossip of the victory outside Moscow and Stalingrad but there were no changes for the villagers. Petka was caught twice and whipped by the police goons for hanging around in the woods without permission. His nan just about pulled him round. Vaska was bright and he didn't get caught. A lot of village men went to serve as police goons. They were given a ration, a wage of thirty marks a month, which was nearly three hundred Soviet roubles. They were also promised a hundred marks for "solid information" of guerillas. But there were no guerillas nearby and no information either.

"Voluntary helpers" of the new power made people work at the station, clear the railway, cut out the bushes along the road, they often got their livestock and took it to the near-by village where the Germans stayed. Petka's grandma had to take a basket full of potatoes, carrots and onions there every week. Actually, people would come out of the village only with the warden's permission. Did she have it?.. Once grandma left the vil-

lage and didn't come back. The boys kept waiting for her, then they looked for her, they even asked the local warden about her. He didn't say anything, he surely knew something but he just gave a wave of his hand. At risk of getting caught, they ran to the village where the Germans stayed, hid behind the bushes, crept along the road hoping to see and learn something about Grandma. All in vain. So they decided the Germans had killed her. They must have asked for the written permission and she didn't have it, so they shot her straight away.

After their failed trip the knocked out boys went to Petka's empty house. They would sit there at the candle light and think of some new plans to find guerillas and any food.

In the autumn of 1943 the cheerful news spread – fascists had been beat badly outside Kursk and were chased everywhere. Petka was shaking his head distrustfully and saying, "I'll tell you what, Vaska, there can't be anything good without any reason! Something will spoil it!" He must have had second sight! The police goons were making up a list of the villagers again. Estonians came to the regional centre and it was clear the people would be taken to Germany for work. Many villagers grabbed what they could with them and disappeared in the woods. They thought it was better to be near a bonfire in the woods in winter than to go to a foreign land.

The inseparable duo, Vaska and Petka, had been to the farm many times and knew it was impossible to survive there in winter, all the sheds there had broken down, the wood had rotten and the bonfire smoke would be recognized for sure – if not by the Germans then by the local police goons. However, it would be silly to stay in the village. So, without waiting to be huddled into a barn, the boys ran away as far away as they could – to the other side of the river. The SS-men decided the guerillas had taken all the villagers with them. So they burned a lot of houses according to their rules.

In early November the yellow leaves had not fallen off the trees yet but the fallen snow was bending young rowans to the ground. It had been fifteen degrees below zero for nearly a week, even the Plyussa froze. In the wind-calm the smoke over the remaining houses' roofs looked stuck to the chimneys and was stretching with white streams towards the black sky with the bright unblinking stars and the giant round moon, which was like a projector illuminating the wood, white with snow, quiet village and the low veil over the hearth and home.

Vasya and Petya had been wandering in the deep snow for a week. Starving and chilled to the bone, in wet felt boots, they at last came to the railway, then walked along it and ran into an unfamiliar village. They knocked on the door of the first house asking for food. That was where their wandering finished. Police goons grabbed the boys and locked them in the local school cellar.

The next day they and all the remaining young people of the village were ordered to the near-by station. Over the crowd of huddling people there were clouds of steam moving heavily. They had been standing in the freezing cold for two hours waiting for something, surrounded by guards with guard dogs. Suddenly they heard a command and they were pushed into two old freight cars without any explanations, the doors were shut, locked and the train began to move. The loud continuous barking of the sheep-dogs gradually faded away and the only thing they could hear was the wheel rattle against the railway joints compressed of the frost. The metal sound was hurting the boys' heads, ticking away at their childhood slipping away.

2.

Inside the carriage it was as cold as it appeared to be outside. In an hour or two it did get a little warmer because of the people breathing, so it did warm them

up a bit. The boys squeezed through into the dark corner. Petka covered Vasiliy who started picking a nail out of the floor board with a rusty piece of iron he had just found. They had been picking it out for five hours taking turns and their hands had been scratched and were bleeding. The huge nail cropped out for about three centimetres. They needed something to pick it up with! Then they would be able to lift the floor board, and another one. After that they could just dive under the floor and that would be it!

At the stops the convoy checked the train, tapped in the wheels and walls with wooden clubs. In the morning two Germans in long overcoats and with guns came into the carriage. They had a skinny bloke in a black coat with a multicoloured bar on his sleeve with them. It was difficult to say whether he was Russian. They looked around searching for someone. They didn't find anyone. They didn't give people any water or food, they just left, locked the doors and the train started moving again. In the next three hours the nail moved back to its place because of the heavy rocking and now it was hardly sticking out. The boys were extremely thirsty and starving.

Behind the window bars they could see trees, electric poles, then grey high-rise buildings, plant chimneys, stations and white signs with foreign letters on them. Trains with cannons and tanks, covered with canvas, were moving at a great speed in the opposite direction. The sky was gradually getting dark, it was the third day twilight. They were far away now, maybe a thousand kilometres from their village. Suddenly there was an explosion. The locomotive hooted drawlingly, the carriage gave a jolt, the buffers clanked. The loud dog barking and abrupt German commands were forced into the open doors with the frosty evening air and harsh smoke of the burning train. Everyone tried to jump out. Before standing up, they grabbed the snow mixed with the

black soil spattered with the explosion and swallowed it quenching their thirst. The guards were standing near each carriage and pushing the stream of people away from the railway. There were black craters, tie bars and ruined railings sticking out every way in front of the train. Someone said it was Poland.

The line of people stretched out for nearly a kilometre. There were all sorts of people: ostarbeiters, like Petka and Vaska, prisoners of war, Estonian guards, German casualties from the train. The latest were being carried by the nurses in white coats away from the main column. Some people decided the Germans were occupied with themselves and started running... They were shot straight away. It looked as though someone invisible and omnipresent was sitting high in a tree, on a house roof or somewhere on a cloud, watching the order and instantly mending all disorders in the precise German "Ordnung" – people streams' allocation.

Covered trucks came, Germans loaded their wounded and left. The crowd of the war and civil prisoners was forced to walk for another two days. Without food or water. They were just swallowing snow. If someone fell, they would kill him with a bayonet. They didn't waste bullets, they must have been saving them. Then they waited for the train and kept everyone near the station in a big old barn with holes in its roof. Everything was filthy and stunk, on the cold floor there lay half-dead wounded Red Army soldiers who couldn't get up, next to the dead, their hands would be lifted up to get a spare ration of bread. They were given hot dirty slip-slop with a small amount of potatoes which was thrown into the huge cauldron from the sacks, not just with their skin, but with the soil as well. That was gulped down from tins, hats or just with cupped hands.

Petka, grown wise by his grandma, would always say something clever, suitable for the occasion. "It's best

not to eat this slip-slop," he would say to his friend, "or we'll get diarrhoea – then we won't survive for sure. Nan used to throw away the cabbage soup which had turned sour. Even the dog didn't eat it. This is it! We'll save bread. Can you hear me, Vaska?"

Vasiliy was looking at the far corner of the barn. The women were crowding there. Some of them would show each other some small paper bags crying tenderly and hide them under their coats or wadded jackets at once. "What have they got?" Vaska thought but he didn't happen to find out then. Another train came and took away another group of prisoners with Vaska and Petka.

The open air platforms with high sidewalls were packed with people. The human mass couldn't even move. Among the alive people there were those who had just died... The boys kept together. They didn't talk, in order to save their strength. They were full of lice. While the train was moving, it was rocking and they couldn't feel the lice but when it stopped in a dead end to let another train pass, the itching would become unbearable.

This went on for two days. On the third morning it was getting freezing cold, everything reeled before Vaska's eyes... There was no Petka, no prisoners, no Germans, no Estonians with their guns on the carriage ends... He could see the young lieutenant who had come to their village to mobilize men. The lieutenant was turning to Vaska with his stretched arm holding a pistol and shouting something trying to prove a point to him. Then he suddenly bent down to Vaska and said slowly and quietly, "Follow me to attack..." The lieutenant waved his arm again, shouted something and his medal banged against his belt buckle...

Vaska startled. "Attack," Vasiliy repeated slowly to himself. Why was it now that the words sounded so clear? In June 1941 he didn't pay attention to them. "Why am I not following the lieutenant?" His blurry and muddled thoughts were like a spider web smothering his mind and

sucking it into reality. "Say I have a weapon and am rushing straight in front of the machine-gun fire. Then if I decide to fall and wait... Am I being a coward? Of course I am!" Vaska was telling himself. "I don't think people would do that in battle. It's embarrassing. But here... It's different here. Everything is different here," Vaska tried to convince himself. "You are not a fighter here, you have no weapon, no warm clothes, no food, no help from anyone and... All you think about is getting something to eat and the war to finish... It's not important how... Doesn't matter..." Vaska startled again, "Who said that?" Around him were people standing with their eyes shut and their bodies rocking to the wheels rattling. Their eyebrows, eyelashes, thick bristle on their faces were covered with white frost, there was hardly any steam of their breathing. "Was it me? I must have just thought of that. Or am I saying it aloud now?"

Vasiliy suddenly remembered he had not thought once about his Zinka or other relatives in the last ten days and he didn't even care of anything. He just wanted this endless road to finish.

A miracle turned up in the form of a skinny bloke in a cap, black coat and a coloured bar on his sleeve. At the last stop the remaining alive civilians and prisoners of war who had turned into motionless white dummies with their clothes covered with snow and rain crust were offered food ration and clean clothes by the German command...

3.

On top of the station building behind the platform there was the town name – Lublin. The soldiers would pull civilians out of the solid mass of frozen bodies and take them somewhere. They had already taken half of them and no one had come back. It was Vasiliy's turn now. His legs were frozen, numb and couldn't move. A sudden sharp pain in his groin was giving him no peace

and made him constantly double up. But if he stayed there it would mean going on the train again. No! Whatever would be, would be! He whispered something to his friend and tumbled out of the carriage. Got on all fours. A moment later Petka was near him. Knackered and not able to bend his knees, he was crawling around Vaska until the guard poked his gun in their backs and forced them to stand up.

Three Germans grabbed the boys' arms and pulled them aside. "They are going to finish us off now," flashed in Vaska's head. Suddenly the soldiers stopped and walked away, leaving the boys standing in front of the bloke in a coat and cap. "No, that's not the one who was in the carriage," Petka thought in doubt.

"How old are you?" was the bloke's first question. He was looking at Petka downwards and dabbing his chest with his finger.

"We are sixteen," Vasiliy lied trying to talk before his friend spoke. He drew himself up to his full height and demonstrated his poise: heels in, toes out, arms at side.

Petka nodded. His eyes fixed on the black, good quality drape of the coat of the bloke standing in front of him, he couldn't tear his eyes of the shiny buttons. "They must have been polished with tooth powder," flashed through his mind. Then he looked up, demonstrated resignation and faithfulness, he tilted his head like an idiot and grinned from ear to ear.

"You can choose, guys, whether you want to go to a camp or join the RLA - Russian Liberation Army," the tall man pointed at the bar on his coat sleeve and added hoarsely with a patter, "You've got to decide now if you want to serve the right purpose. If not, you'll walk to a death camp tomorrow. Majdanek is not far away from here," he wound his head towards the high pipes with black smoke on the outside of the town and headed to other prisoners.

Vaska didn't know what a "death camp", but it was clear people were killed there. He also didn't know what the Liberation Army was but he could guess it was not Russian, it must have been the Germans that had thought of that nasty trick. "We can always make it to the camp," Vasiliy thought to himself, "but to find ourselves at the front is just what we need. We'll find a way to escape from there."

"We've got to agree. What do you think, Petka? Shall we fight?" Vaska looked at his friend craftily.

"Yes, agreed! We don't need to die, do we?" Pyotr played along. He was bending over all the time not to look so small and rubbing his numb legs with his hands. "I bet we'll get some food and clobber..."

The man in a coat turned to the boys again, pushed Vasiliy towards a barracks door and shouted abruptly, "Over there!"

The boys, hunched over and limping, went into the barracks. There the stoves were smoking and it was warm. It was warm for the first time in the last seven days. At the long table made out of rough boards, there sat two people in strange uniform – it looked German, but the shoulder loops were without "cables". They were asking questions and writing down everything the boys were saying about themselves: their names, date of birth, where they lived, where their parents were, whether they had relatives who were communists and much more. Then they were given a document to sign – an application of the voluntary joining the RLA.

"Why? At least we'll have a day!" said the prisoners of war having agreed to put on a German uniform. "At least we'll have three cigarettes a day, and a thicker broth." For families of the missing in action to continue getting their food ration, prisoners of war used to register with a strange name and a made-up address.

After the railway explosion all of the prisoners got mixed up and the boys decided to identify themselves

with different names and change their age in order to join the army and be sent to the front.

Everyone in the barracks, about fifty people, were marched to the partition wall. They got undressed behind it, stood up along the wall and were washed with a water jet from a fire hose. The cold water smelt of chlorine and their eyes stung but they definitely washed out the remaining dirt and lice stuck to their bodies. The stomach-ache eased as well. After that they were given clean clothes and boots. Vaska put on underpants, then a jacket with a German spread-eagle on the right side of his chest and a coloured label on his left sleeve. He thought, "It feels foul, that's not how I wanted it... I wouldn't be able to rip it off." Vasiliy touched the label and glanced at Petka who was shifting around, trying to see his new off-size clothes and wondering if there were any more coloured labels and eagles which would need cutting off quickly later.

The next day they were transported in the trucks to the square in front of the town hall. They saw two rows of people in the same uniform as theirs, with the same stripes on their sleeves. They took the oath of fealty to Fuhrer. They pronounced in chorus, "As a devoted son of my Motherland, I am joining voluntarily the soldiers of the fighting forces of the peoples of Russia and in front of my countrymen I swear – for the good of my people I will fight Bolshevism to the death under the command of General Vlasov..." After that each of them would come up to the desk, take an ink pen, dip it in the ink and sign the oath text. "In spite of it being a foreign land, the ink-pot is the same we had at school," Vasiliy thought when he overwrote a doodle on the thin sheet with names and signatures, the same as he had written on the "voluntary agreement". He felt like piercing the sheet with a pen but then he changed his mind.

The boys didn't waste time at their shooting and marching drills. They discussed in detail all possible fur-

ther developments. Where would they be taken? When? How were they going to run away? What would they say at the home unit? As a matter of fact, their plan added up to escaping as soon as they could. What was the German oath for them? Or signing a document? The boys didn't think of that. They were going to violate a German oath, not theirs. And they had put different names... But something kept bothering Vasiliy, he felt squeamish. From time to time he would hear his painful inner voice, "We would have agreed to join that army for the sake of not freezing in that carriage..." He tried to chase away that thought. He did but it would remind him again and again, "Now there's a surprise... Over the top! Follow me!"... You are a coward, Vasya! Whatever you call yourself. Coward, coward, coward..." At time like these Petka would look at his friend differently, as if he could hear his thoughts, as if he had his doubts and asked his mate with his unusual blue eyes – he asked him the main secret question, "Will we work it out?..."

In December the independent Vlasov company was sent to Belorussia where the Red Army was advancing the attack in Vitebsk-Polotzk line. They manned the defences. It took them a long time to dig out the frozen soil, then they, being wet of sweat and invisible in their white camouflage cloaks, sat in the trench and waited for the command to advance. In front of them there was a thin forest, behind it there were Red Army lines. "There are Russians both sides..." Vasiliy thought, then he bent over to Petka and whispered, "Damn, how can we cut the bars off? We can't take the cloak off, can we?"

"Look what I've got," Petka got the overcoat collar from under the camouflage cloak and proudly turned it over. There was a shiny red enamelled flag with a star in the middle and with big yellow letters "CIY – Communist Youth League". "I found it before the war when I went into town with nan.

A green rocket flew up into the sky, the Vlasov “volunteers” reluctantly got out of the trench and slowly moved forward in line. Nearby a machine-gun was peppering the Russians. The boys got delayed for a moment and when everybody had gone into the assault, they shot the machine gunners and followed the others. They just needed to turn left and run another hundred metres. Over there, behind the glade, across the clearing, they could see some fresh black soil in the snow. They were running in zig-zags trying to save themselves from the bullets on either side. There was the forest! Behind them a gun machine was firing again. Petka fell into the snow. Vasiliy fell as well. It was not possible to run with the machine-guns firing. He called Petka but his friend stayed lying face down and didn’t move, then Vasiliy crawled up to him, turned Petka over onto his back with great difficulty and clung his head to his friend’s heart. There was silence! He started looking for bullet marks but when he looked at Petka’s glazy eyes, he understood everything. The circumstances didn’t let him waste time. “Shall I drag him or leave him here? Drag or leave?” Vaska hesitated for a moment, then he closed Petka’s eyes – he remembered grown-ups do that – and crawled away from him without remembering about the badge on his collar.

Another minute – and Vasiliy flew over the black soil parapet and found himself among the Red Army soldiers. Around him were the same people as he, in white cloaks, shooting from guns, pulling off the wounded and swearing. His heart was high, his body was filled with comfort and he felt like sleeping. At first they didn’t pay any attention at him but when they beat off Vlasovites’ assault, two of them crawled to him, looked carefully and the elder one smashed his gun-butt on his head. Vasiliy passed out.

His white hood had moved ages ago and under it was a black trapper hat with an eagle instead of the red star.

The secret agents didn't even listen the story about two kids, Vaska and Petka, escaping from the hunger and cold. "You, little shit, are too quick!" the lieutenant concluded. He looked like the officer who had come to their village at the beginning of the war. He was also young, with a medal on his chest, but instead of the bright crimson buttonholes he had bright blue shoulder loops. He was carefully writing down everything into his book and at the same time he was saying what he was writing, as if he was spelling, "... before the other soldiers of RLA he got into the trench occupied by the troop unit No.4527/23 and was captured by arriving Red Army soldiers."

Vasiliy was sent to the back land, into the marching check-filter camp. There were Red Army soldiers in just service shirts, Cossacks in their warm rammed round hats, some blokes in black police overcoats or even SS uniform with ripped off "zips" in the button-holes... They slept straight in the snow.

"I shot myself in the foot," Vasiliy whispered in a fit of anger. After everything he had seen in the Special Branch and here, in the camp, he suddenly realized that had he been older they would have done him in without thinking. At least they believed he was under fifteen... The boy even thought, "Such bad luck, Petka. It's all for nothing - we are going behind enemy lines again!"

But that was a different home front. In the prison office Vaska was handed a piece of paper, "Sign it!" He saw, "By the decision of the Special Council of the Military Division... according to Articles of Criminal Code of the Russian Federation... imprisonment for 25 years with indefinite deportation..." The piece of tissue paper was shaking in Vasiliy's hands while he was reading the hardly seen printed letters of the verdict. The ink of the typewriter had dried out and the tape had worn out so instead of the letters the thin transparent paper had been punched through with the metal characters. Tears were

showering from his eyes and wouldn't let him see the text. That was the second time in one week that Vasiliy was signing a document. Second time in his life. This time he was signing with his real name. He had been informed!

4.

Before the war Vaska's sister Zina was considered the most beautiful girl in their village. Fellows were storming her house! When the Germans came, she was hiding indoors. They took her among other villagers to work in Germany – she put a dirty scarf on her head. For a week it was really filthy and stinky in the carriage, there was dirty straw everywhere, two buckets of defecation fell and were rolling in a puddle of urine, splashing everyone around. Fresh air was only getting through a small railed window at the top of the wall and there was definitely not enough of it. The first time they allowed the people to come out of the carriage was in Leipzig. The girls were standing along the wall, huddled together, hungry, grubby, in ragged clothes. In short, they looked like slaves. They left the carriage, staring, looking around them. Everything was clean, the houses were colourful, the churches unusual, an orchestra was playing, the chimneys were shining. The column was led from the carriage to a barrack and soldiers in black uniform were selecting the girls for working as maids in rich Germans' houses. Zina was selected – her beauty was impossible to hide.

The next morning after having been disinfected, washed, dressed in clean clothes and with her hair brushed, Zinaida appeared in front of her new family. Now she was an "Ostarbeiter", a prisoner registered at a concentration camp No.153/46 outside Leipzig but placed on detached service in a German family. The head of the family was a building engineer, a mature tonsured man, he had a young wife, a two-year-old boy and a son

from a previous marriage, a student. Everyone was cultured and polite, no one shouted, the house was clean and tidy. Zina had her own room with a bed and a bedside cabinet, a big mirror and two blankets. She was fast to learn orders, surprisingly well remembered long German phrases and could say them without an accent. Among all the dresses and aprons for the maids she would choose the prettiest cuts with a pleasant combination of colours. That was noticed. They started trusting her. She was serving up, doing the shopping for the family and even looking after the child. In short, she was promoted.

The engineer's eldest son, tall, slender and cultured even fell in love with the Russian maid, he would often come into her room to help her with her German and to learn some Russian. Every time he would bring her a flower. Sometimes a twig of mimosa or lilac, sometimes iris or another flower with a complicated name she couldn't remember. When he kissed Zina, she burst into tears and her big brown eyes became even more beautiful.

In her free time Zinaida would sit at a small desk and write letters to her brother and sisters with an ink pen. She wrote to them every week and always added something in German. She would tell them about her life in a foreign land, her work and her host's son. Every time she would put a photo of herself in the envelope – in a new dress, in a coat with a handbag and a hat which didn't hide her hairdo. She had a whole pack of those letters. Zina would tie them up with a ribbon. It was a sort of her diary. There was just one trouble – she was telling them about herself but she didn't know anything about them. How were they? How was Vasya managing in the village? He was so silly, he had surely run away again to fight fascists. There was no one to catch him now.

Time was flying. In the autumn of 1943 the engineer's eldest son, being a fourth-year student of university, was called up to the war. Before he left for the Eastern

front, the father and son had a long conversation. The head of the family was trying to convince his son. But what? Zina couldn't understand. She just understood separate phrases. "Hitler and fascists began the war... Death of Germany..." Then something about the family, duty, motherland... Having lived in Germany for a year, Zinaida was aware that those words were enough for the talkers to find themselves in a camp.

Three months later they got a notice saying the engineer's son had gone missing. When the father was reading the letter, his wife was sitting in an armchair, weeping and holding a white handkerchief near her eyes. Zina was standing next to her and crying. The little boy was frightened, he tried to hold her knees with his little hands.

Before New Year 1945, for Christmas, the family gave Zinaida a new woollen coat, a short calabar coat, a fur-trimmed hat and brown leather high-heeled boots. Neither more nor less, a German girl! She was fluent at speaking and reading and could even write in German. Her talent was brought to light! For three years in the family she had nearly become German.

One day in spring the engineer called Zina to his study and started an unusual conversation, unusual for the host and maid. He offered Zina to go to the west with them, to Lotharingia, which was his motherland. He even explained why. "Because the war will end soon, Nazism will be defeated at last, but it's better to live as far away from the Russian Army with its political officers as possible... I know what I am talking about. I worked in Russia in 1935..." The head of the family would put Russian words into his German trying to make her trust him. Zina had already got used to not understand everything spoken in the family. There was nothing to understand really - everything was clear without words. But this time she had to be persuaded. The Russian words in the German's speech didn't add

any points. On the contrary, they just made things worse and pushed Zinaida away, reminded her of her village, brother and sisters... They made her remember another thing – the feeling implanted from her childhood, “It is a crime to leave your country or even think about it, it is as dreadful as espionage or sabotage..”

Zinaida stayed on her own in the big empty house.

The first day when the Russians appeared in town she was thought to be a German, they tried to find out where her family was, where the men were, they were looking for military uniform in the wardrobe. When she started speaking Russian, the instinct worked, “You slut can speak Russian! Spy!” First they beat Zina up, then they pulled her onto a bed. Her tears, shouts, Russian language, all the swear words she knew – nothing stopped them. It was not just lust that drove them, it was revenge. She tried to seem Russian to them but the soldiers’ verdict, “We don’t have Russians like her!”

In the Soviet military commandant’s office they started check-ups and endless questioning. Everyone had to go through that purgatory: survived concentration camp prisoners, Ostarbeiters, interned persons, former Vlasov volunteers, refugees from the Baltics and Western Ukraine. They didn’t have enough interpreters and Zina came in handy. She was enrolled on the military administration staff. She would sit at questionings, translate, write down questions and answers. She had seen a lot of fates in the three after-war years. Some people were the same as her. Most of them were sent to a filtration camp. They were let out only if someone could confirm that while working for Germans the person had been fighting against fascism together with the German underground and Communists... So it would have taken at least two years to get to the bottom. At the same place, in Leipzig, in 1947 Zinaida was admitted to Komsomol as an award for her work in the commandant’s office.

In those days many people had doubts about whether to return to Motherland or not. It was not clear what would happen to them. If they had worked for the enemy, they were public enemies themselves. Even if Germans lived in your house during invasion you were their ally! But these thoughts were torturing mostly people who had found themselves with the Americans or English. People who had been in the Russian zone didn't really think of that. Zina would be anxious now and again. When she found herself in the middle of Germany at the very beginning of the war, the very phrase "It's full of Germans in town" seemed terrifying. Then she got used to it. Now she had all home faces around her – it looked she was already at home! For her there was no doubt – she had to go back! To her own village.

Having worked in the commandant's office for three years, Zinaida got a reference letter from the MSS saying although she was interned, she was "good". She went to Leningrad. Her German clothes – she didn't have any others – made her look uncommon and alarmed most people. She would be walking in town, so beautiful that other people turned around, as if those in Leipzig who said, "We don't have Russians like her", were right.

Her sisters Katya and Shura returned from the evacuation in 1944, straight after the siege of Leningrad was lifted, and in 1947 they as accounting college graduates were forwarded to work in the Regional Financial Department of Primorsk, former Finnish town of Koivisto. Their husbands Dmitry and Gleb went with them. Gleb was a former tank man and worked as a gas welder in the only secret plant in town. Every morning he left for work at 7 and every night he came home at 7, knackered. Just the journey took him 2 hours every day. He would bring home a bucket or a hand brace made at work. Later on stainless steel appeared. Workers would make stools,

pails for pickling, door handles, knives for themselves. All the tombs in the local cemetery were shining with that metal. On Sundays Gleb would have a drink at dinner time and with a sad heart recall the pre-war years when he had been an honoured tractor driver rewarded with the certificate of honour of the USSR Supreme Soviet...

Katya's husband was invalided from military service at the end of 1942 and he returned to his wife after he had found her in the evacuation. He didn't work, he stayed at home and drank vodka. Once when he was in a health resort about fifteen years after the war, a doctor told him he should drink dry wine instead of vodka. How could he have said that! Now Gleb was swallowing dry wine one bottle after another. He didn't wish any of his youth fun, memories of daring fights after disco in the village club. In 1964 the family moved into the first five-storey brick block of flats in town – with central heating and gas, and he didn't leave his flat for weeks.

Zina got a room in a wooden house on the skirts of Primorsk. Around it there were sheds of unpainted faded planks and a few rickety barracks remained after the Finnish. She started teaching German in a local school. She was young and beautiful, it was impossible not to take notice of her. A handsome guy with long whiskers and a forelock sticking out of the naval cap who was an executive officer on a fishing seiner and was called Nickolay, had been wooing her for a month. He was known to everyone in town. Men like him wouldn't miss any woman. Zina tried to avoid him, she liked the deputy head teacher who was teaching Maths. He was considerable and got on in years. The executive officer, on the contrary, was fond of the bottle and was about five years younger than Zina.

However, once after a party on the occasion of the first open water, Nickolay stumbled into Zinaida's room, pushed her on the bed and raped her. Zina got

pregnant and had to solemnize a marriage to Nickolay. She was terrified of publicity – she was different from everyone anyway.

The executive officer was hardly ever at home. When he did come back he would draw himself into drinking. Then the couple would argue with or without any reason. He would see her German photo where she was wearing a hat and smiling – and start shouting at her, rip the photo into pieces, jealous of her past life. He would often lay hands on her.

When it was time to give birth, Zina found out the baby was stillborn and she would never be able to have children.

5.

Prisoners in the Siberian camp found out the war had been over only a month later. The news had been withheld from them. They probably didn't want to share the joy with the prisoners. To announce it in front of the line of prisoners was the same as after the battle in front of the Reichstag. They couldn't afford to hug and kiss them all. What was more, all the prisoners were different – German prisoners of war, volunteers of Bandera and Vlasov having offended in the war or during invasion, police goons... There were also servicemen and engineers, scientists and priests, accountants and students who had already served ten years... Those were called "politics" and sent from one camp to another so that they couldn't get used to each other. A spicy mixture of "spies", "diversionists" and "followers of Trotsky and Zinoviev" could have exploded! There were also robbers and real gangsters – it was not possible to handle everything! Each person was so complicated!

Everyone accepted the news of victory differently. Some people didn't react at all. Victory meant they had to

serve for a long time! The difference now was to get rid of the unnecessary illusions during the check-up, when they had to pronounce louder and more confidently, "Prisoner so and so, article so and so, serving a term of imprisonment of so and so years." Someone might have had a quiver inside, under his jacket, near his heart, but only a little bit, as if the victory was somewhere else, in Korea or China, and had nothing to do with their time, area or soul. Other prisoners were sincerely happy, some waited for an amnesty. Police goons and Vlasov volunteers, those who had been chasteners, were angry – they had backed Germans and miscalculated. Those didn't miss a chance to take a revenge to the "Krauts" – Bandera's followers and Balts.

Every time Vasiliy was moved to another prison – in Komi, beyond the Urals or Kolima – he peered into faces trying to find someone like him, an unreal Vlasovets, offended by the power for the wrong accusation. Vasiliy tried not to think of his childhood. His agonizing thoughts came to no good – just despair. When the twilight made all the colours fade away, he had nowhere to run from his nightmares. Fear made him live with his memories and added an incredible heroic nature to them. All his life went through his conscience and sometimes he felt offended he was serving time for nothing, like he was an invalid and he couldn't even call himself a Vlasovets with pride and dare, like the others did.

Then the morning would come, grey, joyless and vague. The future would seem a dreadful kaleidoscope of a wrench, broken dreams and expectations of the unknown.

"How I would love to run away! I would pick mushrooms, go fishing, make a bonfire, build a hut," Vasiliy was dreaming childishly. "Why not? I could... But what for?! Again he had just one thought – how to escape! To run away into the woods, a thick forest where they wouldn't be able to find him. Maybe, to the North... He

was lying on the bare plank bed shining of the muddy, sweaty and bloody prison uniform of thousands of prisoners. Over the camp there were flying rain clouds threatening to burst any minute. They were like fate, putting pressure on everyone settling down there, calling either a full apathy or readiness to act. The first of them was killing any hope and the second one was killing apathy. Every person had to make a choice.

"I've got to wait for the summer," Vasilii decided.

In the summer of 1947 everyone came to life. The sun was giving back strength fast. One day in July the governor chose about ten people and sent them and the guards to a new site in the woods, twenty kilometres away. There was a shed or an old half-demolished cottage which they fenced off straight away. That was where the prisoners had to stay: political prisoners, criminals, ex-soldiers of RLA and a German prisoner of war. The guards lived in a tent next to them. There were two spotlights connected to a slider with light oil. For some reason in a thick forest they had to dig out two hundred holes, two by two metres each and two metres deep. The heat was unbearable. There was no escape from it and from ubiquitous ginger mosquitoes. At least it was not a prison! As Petka used to say, "Something will spoil it!" Evil bloodsuckers lived just to take the sun energy from mice and men immediately. Blisters from their bites covered the prisoners' faces, necks and ears. They were scratched to blood with dirty hands and all the body got abscessed. Drunk from the blood, mosquitoes were falling on the ground or into the bowls with thin broth. Some prisoners would squeamishly move them aside with a spoon. Others just ignored and gulped down hot water with an overcooked onion and thin cabbage leaves mixed with thick ginger mush.

In the night shift the guards allowed them to leave unfinished holes and start new ones so that at midday in the full blaze of the sun they could climb down the

unfinished holes and dig the ground in the shade of their walls. The ground was unbearably hard. Now and again the prisoners would sit on the bottom of the hole and dig it with a hack, trying to see, "What's there under it, when will the ground be normal?" It was mostly limestone, which was impossible to dig with a shovel. At four o'clock in the afternoon they would beat the rail and the guards led everyone to the river to water. People got into the river in their clothes and drank water like horses. Under the hot water it would become warm and didn't quench their thirst. While the guards were not watching, some people managed to fling themselves into the water, get close to the bottom and swallow the cool water there. If the guards saw that, they started firing a rifle in the water, as it was considered an attempt to escape.

They dug two hundred holes, grouted in and on the top of each of them built frameworks the same size for the coming pillars, between them they put planks at a height of two metres, which was a path for wheelbarrows. The tough guys made the cement, the political prisoners were standing near the holes and throwing stones into the mixture poured out of the wheelbarrows, the rest of them were pushing the wheelbarrows along the laid planks. They were not nailed up, just laid one on another, and under the weight of the prisoner with a wheelbarrow long planks were sagging and separating and the people were falling on the stones scattered about. From outside, through the two-metre pillars, it was impossible to see whether a prisoner had fallen or was still pulling his heavy wooden wheelbarrow along the serpentine board road. Everyone fell many times, but the planks could not be fixed – nails were on strict allowance. Vasilij's face and body were covered in bruises; the palms of his hands were tied with rags – his hand muscles were so stretched he couldn't hold a spoon. In front of his eyes there was dreadful red limestone, as if

covered with blood, and grey slush of the cement rolling in a wheelbarrow.

Vasiliy's heart was high only at the end of the shift when everyone else started snoring on the hay. Through their snoring he could hear subtle shivering of the leaves in the aspen grove. That was when he liked to get up, come to the giant hole in the wall and enjoy the sight of the leaves change their colour in the beams of the powerful spotlights. In only one second they would turn from invisible to white, with shiny silver. It looked to him that the outside world was shining and invitingly flickering in the night.

"This is where I've got to try and run away," Vasiliy decided, "there are only five guards, it's easy to hide, it's high time..."

Today there was a skinny German with a wheelbarrow in front of Vasiliy all the time. Suddenly he disappeared. "Goodness me!" Vasiliy nearly shouted with disappointment. He had been getting ready, calculated everything but the German left him behind! The tall, skinny guy was lying on the ground among stones, doubled up unnaturally, his wheelbarrow was lying on his legs and the lips on his bloody face were whispering something. Vasiliy heard, "Help". He had been planning to fall off the board road, hide behind the hills of stones and then escape into the woods running between the holes and pillars. The German spoilt everything. Two people would have been too much, the guards would notice. Vasiliy stopped his wheelbarrow, jumped on the ground and pulled the long guy to the barrel with water for cement which was near the shed. A guard came up to him and Vasiliy gave a wave of his hand – it was a common thing. He ripped a piece of the German's clean shirt and bandaged his head. The injury looked serious, he might have had concussion, but there was not much blood. The German remained lying

near the barrel but the rest of the prisoners were led to the river in the evening to unload the barge of cement with shovels. They returned only in the morning. They were covered in white and had breathed in a lungful of cement, enough for the rest of their lives. Vasiliy was coughing non-stop, he was scared to have something stuck or glued inside, like the pillars in the framework. He was tired but couldn't sleep of overpressure.

The German had already regained consciousness, he stumbled along to his saviour and started thanking him. He spoke quite good Russian. He secretly pulled some green grass from behind a board in the wall, then something else wrapped in a cloth and gave them to Vasiliy. "These are horse-radish and honey. Put it in a leaf and chew, It's to not get ill. Vitamins..."

"Where did you get them from?" Vasiliy was stunned.

"I found the horse-radish on the bank," the German said proudly, "I dug it out with my hands and planted it behind the shed, in autumn you can eat its roots. If we live that long... But we've got to water it."

"What about this?" Vasiliy bit off a piece from the sticky dark brown mass. It tasted tart and sour and its incredible linden flavour savoured smoke. The wonderful product soothed Vasiliy's unceasing cough.

"The honey is right there, in a hollow. I'll show you," Jerry suddenly changed his face and added very seriously, as if it was the most important thing in life, "There's more there but we shouldn't take everything, the bees need some for the winter."

There were two hours left until getting up. The German didn't stop talking about himself. He was a botanist student but hadn't graduated, he had been called up in 1943 and sent to the Eastern front. He had been in a supply troop, then their base had been surrounded, many had been killed and he had surrendered with a white flag.

"It's much better in a camp with prisoners of war than to shoot civilians," the student said. He had seen SS-men that made soldiers do that. "Nazis are a great trouble for Germany," Vasiliy could see the German was happy to have found someone who had helped, listened to him and maybe even understood him.

Vasiliy was listening to him in silence and chewing the mixture of horse-radish and honey. He was waiting to hear the usual phrase from the German prisoners of war, "Hitler kaput!" but he didn't. He couldn't talk about his own misfortunes and he didn't want either. "No one believes me and this Jerry won't," Vasiliy decided. The German suddenly held Vasiliy's hand, looked in his eyes and started talking calmly and confidently, "What called you to the war? You wanted to go to the front yourself, didn't you?" Vasiliy nodded. "You wanted to and you did. It doesn't matter that you did only through this uniform," the German dabbed with his finger the place on Vasiliy's chest where there was a mark from the cut off emblem of an eagle. "With me it was different... Neither of us wanted this war and now we are sitting together in this shed... You treated me like a human being. I didn't think you were like this, you had always looked at me with hatred. But you turned out..."

"Russians can't be angry for a long time."

"Yes. My father used to say this. He knows Russians and he's always been against this war." The German stopped talking, squeezed his lips and shook his head as if he had thought of something dreadful. "What has happened to him? If it had not been for my father I wouldn't have probably surrendered. There was so much propaganda... What a nightmare! You shouldn't have believed those either!" The student pointed at the dark mark on the faded RLA uniform. "When I was leaving, my father recited the words of the Ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius, "This terror, then, this darkness of the mind, not sunrise with

its flaring spokes of light, not glittering arrows of morning can disperse, but only Nature's aspect and her law..."

Vasiliy didn't understand those words but something stirred in his soul. It was strange, the German had either heard about the unsociable Vlasovets or was really discerning, but Vasiliy was surprised to hear his words and he appreciated and trusted the guy and, like a sponge, he absorbed everything he was saying. It was that night that a new strange feeling was born in Vasiliy's heart. It was not self-confidence but it was incomprehensible peace. It felt like he entered a quiet harbour, which was an amazing shelter for his tortured soul, and everything in the woods was satisfying his eye and that feeling seemed to never end. It felt like it did when he had been with Petka on the high bank of the Plyussa... "I can't believe that!" Vasiliy thought, "A little bit of quiet water and a beam of the sunset are such common things, but also the dearest things and they have equalized everyone..."

"Don't even think of trying to escape," the German interrupted Vasiliy's thoughts, "you won't be able to get out of taiga on your own, especially in your shoes with holes. Give them to me tomorrow night, I will mend them." After a moment he added, "You like saying, 'Freedom, freedom...' The main thing is to feel free, the rest is nonsense. As you say, all the trouble will pass away."

"To feel free behind the wired fence..." Vasiliy said aloud. "How is it?" He understood it not straight away, but very soon, maybe the next morning.

After the morning check-up the prisoners were led to the holes to work. Their clothes, hardened of sweat and cement, were rubbing their bodies and didn't let them nap on the move. Among the uneven column of the prisoners in their clothes covered in cement, the German stood out with his dark green coat. He was walking and without looking under his feet he was enjoying the nature, lifting his head and watching the clear sky. He didn't look like someone

who had fallen on the stones the day before, he didn't look like a prisoner in a camp. Everything cheered him up that morning: the trees were rustling free and easy, the dew was shining in the grass, it smelt of the morning freshness and everywhere the air was so fresh it made Vasiliy feel drunk! There was a vegetable bed behind the shed. The plants had become a little dry in the morning sun. The student looked enchanted when he took a mug out of his pocket and walked confidently to the water barrel...

A gun shot. The German stopped, turned his head towards the guard and looked at him, surprised. A moment later he fell on his back, as if someone had hit his long legs from his back with a stick. The prisoners came out of trance and stopped, three of them tried to come up to the chap lying at the verge, waved their arms and started swearing at the guards. After all, there were only ten of them, not a hundred. They had been working together for a month and had become close. It didn't matter that he was Jerry. At first many of them used to hit or push him creepily.

Vasiliy was the first to rush to him but he heard the icy sound of the gun shutter and froze. The German was lying the same way as the day before, with his arms spread and his long legs bent unnaturally. The bloody bandage on his forehead had moved onto his blonde hair and his eyes were wide open and staring upwards. The morning blue sky was reflecting in them and his genuine surprise hadn't ended the shining joy. Next to the plants with wide and slightly faded green leaves there lay his aluminium mug.

6.

A year later, in 1948, all German prisoners of war were sent to their motherland. And nineteen-year-old Vasiliy had twenty one years of prison ahead of him. Only now he felt better, he knew he would overcome everything

and survive. He had got an inner core, which kept him alive in the difficult hours, days, months and long years.

"Maybe, everything is made this way," the young guy with an old man's experience would think to himself, "if you don't go through hell or don't get broken once, you can't believe in yourself." Now Vasiliy treated everything differently. A lot of things were clear to him now, and the main thing was he could understand and feel himself, his life-giving union with nature. He would tenderly watch the steam over the clots of the new soil, warmed by the uprising sun and dug along the barbed wire, – where there was freedom, or more precisely, his native land... Now he understood what the crying women had been hiding on the way to Poland – their native soil.

In 1953 Stalin died and a lot of committees came to the Siberian camp. Every day they would interview forty to fifty prisoners. The interview didn't last longer than five minutes and always ended with, "You have committed a crime but the Soviet Government grants you with amnesty and releases you." The word "rehabilitation" was not known to the amnestied.

After the amnesty Vasiliy stayed in the Magadan region. No one had annulled the perpetual exile! He worked in all sorts of places, studied in third-rate trade school, where they accepted people with just primary education, and later he finished an evening secondary school. In 1957 his exile was cancelled.

"That's it! I am free! I can go wherever I want and can do whatever I want! Now I can start looking for my relatives."

It was now, when all the problems had been left behind and he seemed to be able to calm down, that something was bothering him and he had new disturbing questions, "Who am I now? How can I live with my relatives? What am I going to do?"

In his memory there arose his sister Zina's image, very grown-up and serious. Like a teacher. Then there was Petka with his tricky ideas... He couldn't forget his blue eyes! Their dreadful stillness was still hurting Vasiliy. "If he had got to the trench, what would he have done? Petka would have never agreed to be found guilty. I know him! Mind you, what would the difference be? It's only important what the other people think of you! Who are those other people?"

Vasiliy's memory returned him to the Siberian camp again, into the year of 1947 and his conversation with the German who had given him a green leaf of horse-radish, wild honey and revelation in his last night. "Everything happening to you just makes you stronger," the student had told him confidently. "That was said by one of our philosophers, not me. Just believe it!" The German looked at Vasiliy and said apologetically, "Don't resent your motherland! It's in a very difficult position at the moment. Both yours and mine. It can't look in every person's heart." He said that and grinned when he thought, "Will this boy understand that?" He personally was only a couple of years older. "I will tell you that - It doesn't matter what good things you've done but it does matter that you wanted to and aimed to do it genuinely. Even if no one ever knows about it. And they will think you are an enemy. You might not be able to prove anything to anyone at all..."

In that night of revelation with the German prisoner Vasiliy recollected for the first time in four years himself and Petka standing on the high bank of the river, being happy and free, enjoying the sunset, the river and their village and dreaming.

Then he remembered the dust after the truck going to the front. He could even feel the dust on his teeth... The carriage with the rusty nail, his palms in blood... and the damned eagle on his chest.

Today, ten years later, these thoughts were not enough for Vasiliy. He was dreaming of being useful to other people, he needed someone kind to warm him up. "Who is my dearest and nearest? Zinaida, of course! I need to tell her everything and then go to the village, see the steep bank of the Plyussa..."

A year later Vasiliy found his family. Zinaida sent him an invitation and he went to see her. The town was not ordinary, it had an important plant, which was a restricted area, but the local authority allocated him a room in a half-ruined cottage with a stove in a working village and he got registered there. He mended what he could, chopped some firewood. Because of his files he couldn't work at the plant, of course. So he got a job as a stoker in a boarding school for disabled children. His shift was twenty four hours followed by three days off. At first he lived with Zina and Nickolay. When he moved to his own room, he would often go into the woods, get across the river to the isles and wander there for a long time looking for hollows with wild bees. When he found them he made some hives, put them up in the woods in a glade. Two years later Vasiliy started selling honey to a consumer co-operation and getting decent money to live on. Then he bought variety of materials – leather, rubber, felt, strong thread – and established shoe repair. He did it for his acquaintances. Everyone in the village knew Vasiliy-the-shoemaker could cure any illnesses with honey, was always willing to help and support, he was a local sage and voodoo, the right person in town. He was only thirty at the time.

Vasiliy lived as a loner, didn't go anywhere, only to the grocery's or to the shop to buy some clothes. He would come to a shop, dab a loaf of bread with his finger, pay for it, get the bread and leave. Like a foreigner. He never settled down. But when he was in the bee-garden, he transformed. He would wander around the hives, pull something out of them, then put it back

and be talking all the time. He would talk to the bees – praise some of them and tell others off but affectionately... Vasiliy was also good at listening to other people. When someone popped in to get some honey or to share an issue, they would leave enlightened, confident and feeling lucky all of a sudden.

The second year after Vasiliy came to Primorsk, his relatives got together for the first time to celebrate Victory Day. At the end of the tableful the men got off the table and went to the very gulf coast. Nickolay hustled, smiled unnaturally, got a small bottle of vodka out of his side pocket, then three wet little shots with tobacco crumbs stuck to them. "Let's drink to ours!" His brothers-in-law turned to each other, and Vasiliy stayed aside. Gleb and Dmitriy looked at Vasiliy and lowered their eyes, embarrassed, but a second later they looked at their relative again. Now there were contradictory feelings in their faces. Was it their anger? Or were they tears in their eyes which were quenching their feelings?

Before he finished his shot, Nickolay suddenly hit the pit of Vasiliy's stomach and jumped away, fearing a fight-back. He waved his arms and shouted, "To ours!" The instinct worked fast. The other brothers-in-law dropped the unfinished vodka shots and started hitting Vasiliy with their fists, legs and crutches.

Vasiliy seemed to have been waiting for that, he wasn't surprised. He knew why they were beating him, although it wasn't just their hatred to Vlasov volunteers, there was a personal after-war thing... He understood why Gleb and Dmitriy had tears in their eyes. He also knew why their tears were different. He knew Nickolay would be the first to beat him next time as well, trying to hit him as painfully as possible. Because he himself had not been at the front. Because his Zinka had a thing for her brother. Because Vasiliy-the-shoemaker was known and respected in town.

The brothers-in-law were his relatives but nothing in the past had related them together. Nothing apart from the war...

A week later Vasiliy and Zina decided to visit their home village. It seemed to be nearby but they had to travel by train for a whole day, then by bus and a hitch. They got there only in the evening. There were no remaining houses left but in the rowan-tree thicket they found their preserved bath-house and stayed there overnight. In the morning, before walking to the station through the woods, they stood near the burnt framewood of their house, visited their parents' grave, then they went up the high cliff and stood there watching what had been left from their village...

The riverbed was overflowed by the fast spring water. It was running down and nothing seemed to be able to stop it. The smooth surface of the water could reflect the still sun and the white clouds moving slowly. A fish must have come up to the surface, gulped some air and gone back to the bottom. Near that place the slight waves ran in different directions and the sun reflection could be seen shaken. Having passed the reed and stone, the waves got quieter near the bank and surrounded birch-tree trunks and alder bushes with the last season catkins on their bare branches.

"You know, their life hasn't worked out, they are not fine now," Zina started talking. "It's terrible they are like that. They haven't experienced what we have... But the war affected everyone, I feel sorry for them..."

Vasiliy didn't realize at first his sister was talking about the relatives but when he did, he forced himself to smile. He wanted to comfort her, then he cuddled her and said quietly, "As if you and I don't have problems in life!"

"I know, but you and I are strong... everyone respects you..."

"Especially your hero. He tried to be the first to hit me, it must be revenge for something," Vasiliy interrupted her. "How can you live with him?"

"I don't. It's only appearance." Zina was silent for a minute, then she suddenly said, "You know, I've never loved him. He raped me... The same as our soldiers in spring of 1945."

"Why did you have to marry him?"

"The baby... But it was stillborn... Anyway..."

"The same thing with me - anyway!" Vasiliy stopped, he didn't know how to say it. You know, Petka used to say that good things never happen on their own. Something will always spoil them."

"What do you mean?"

"I am all on my own," then he added quietly, "I am thirty but I have never been with a woman and never will be now..."

Zinaida became serious, touched Vasiliy's hand, comforting him, "Don't be silly, Vasiliy! The only thing blokes can't get through is alcoholism. The rest is nonsense, things will end up alright."

She turned her beautiful face to her brother. Her big brown eyes were shining in a special way, as if they were looking at the fireworks.

"I've only loved one person..." she said and felt calm after revealing her biggest secret. "I used to live in his father's house in Leipzig then."

"Who was he? A German?"

"Yes. Why? Does it sound strange? It might do. Even frightful for some. But for me those were the happiest days. Yes, in Germany."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"How could I abandon my parents' house, sisters and you, silly?"

"So what! If you loved him..."

"He left. And..."

"Did he die?"

"He went to the war and disappeared."

"He might be alive. He could be well-fixed somewhere in FRG now," Vasiliy said.

"In Lotharingia..."

Zina went quiet again.

"Petka and I used to climb up here so often," Vasiliy said quietly trying to change the subject. "This was his place. I wish I could bury him here... His death was so silly. He only had a hundred steps to make. Mind you, it was probably for the best..."

"No one had a clever death!"

"Some did! In full view of everyone, spreading their arms, closing a loophole with their body or killed with a bullet and falling beautifully on a birch-tree!"

"Vasya, you are not offended by them, are you?" Zina asked suddenly.

"Tell me, are they jealous? Or greedy?" Vasiliy said in answer. "We won... but they don't want to share the victory..."

"They want this day to be for them only!"

"You can't share the victory," Vasiliy said with conviction. "We have one victory for all... Do you understand? For all! Not only for those who were wounded or died beautifully, not only for "ours" but for people like Petka, you or me... The war took everything from us."

"Everyone paid their price," Zina finished knowingly. "The whole generation has rolled somewhere and we are still paying for that. You were a naive boy, Vasya, you ran to the front after a truck... I remember... You loved Motherland... You were right. You thought they would believe you at the front line, didn't you? We as a family did." Zina put her hand on her brother's shoulder. "The main thing is we are together. You'll find a wife and you'll have children... They will live a long life..."

"I also knew one German lad," Vasiliy suddenly remembered. "He was young and he had surrendered. We were in prison together. He helped me a lot. We talked just one night, but I gathered knowledge for ten years. He was a student. He liked grasses," Vasiliy looked into a distance dreamily and added sadly, "He taught me to collect wild honey..."

"That was him! I know it was! Was his name Gunther?" Zina shouted.

Vasiliy didn't know the name of the German.

Being Both a Judge and an Executioner

1.

The winter of 1941–1942 turned out to be cold. However, the Lemovzha marsh had not frozen in places. In early January, when Fyodor Astakhov was hunting down the parish warden and his brother, he accidentally wandered into the moss covered in thin ice, fell into a bog, struggled to get out of there and after he finally did, he had to walk, wet to his bones. In fact, he was not looking for the chief police goon, Vsevolod Klyonov, but his younger brother Petka, who had shot two people, not locals, from the loft of his house. The people he shot were either guerillas or paratroopers. They wore helmets and overalls. They didn't see any Germans in the village and wandered around the village asking for food. Like small children, honestly!

After that misfortune Fyodor got a chill, he was shivering. With a high temperature he turned up at his mother's. He couldn't wait any more, he came to her for healing and getting warm. He had hot milk and butter, got changed and lay under a heavy quilt, wearing wool socks, black trousers, almost new grey shirt and festive blazer. There were no other clothes for him in the house. He covered his mouth with a rag to conceal his endless cough. After the hot milk he was dripping with sweat. Suddenly Germans arrived at the village. They came on bikes

and cars. There were quite a lot of them, they came to find out where the guerillas had come from the week before. Fyodor jumped down the cellar just in time. He hid in the potato hole in his best clothes. The edges of the hole were fixed with boards. He carefully sprinkled sand on the lid. He felt the pain in the wound in his arm straight away. The shard had moved and caused a rare but sharp pain.

Several Germans came into the house with a sheep-dog and sat at the table. One of them climbed down the cellar and shone a flashlight. He rustled around the sand with a rake, he even got under the floor of the big room to the place where the potato hole was. He had to crouch down. Over there he couldn't really handle a rake. So five minutes later he got out holding a jar of gherkins and joined his fellows cheering and drinking at the table.

Fyodor had prepared that hole in advance for his mother to hide if they were going to burn the house. There she could have saved herself from the fire and waited. In the foundation from the river side he had begun to make a hole, he had already taken several stones from there and covered it with a sheet of rusty iron. It was not visible when there was snow and in the summer it was covered with growing nettle. You could crawl out of there without being noticed. But the manhole was still not ready. He needed to take a couple of stones from the foundation.

In the morning the Germans left the house. Half-dead Fyodor got out of the cellar, his face white and swollen. Even the dog had not sensed him. By the evening the soldiers had left the village. They took some people with them, burned everything in the neighbouring village, including the farms. To teach the villagers a lesson – not to help anyone. The local police goons, Klyonov-junior and Osipov, demonstrated their agility, they caught a Gypsy boy wandering in the village, an orphan, and pulled him out of the village, wounded

in his stomach. He was crying and screaming of pain. The boy was only twelve. Outside the village they finished him off and threw him in a combe.

"I am going to kill those skunks!" Astakhov promised himself. "For sure and in the first place. The parish warden will have to wait. All the village has seen those villains."

After the ill-fated home treatment Fyodor could not visit his parents' house. He only went once and finished the hole in the foundation. He also took half a sack of flour and a piece of lamb to his mother, he got them from the shed of a policeman who lived outside of Moloskovitsy. As soon as he handed them to her he rushed back to the woods, to his dugout.

Astakhov got used to his new routine. In the morning he would sleep in the woods until ten. Then, while it was still warm from the stove, he could cook porridge in a pot and grated frozen lamb in another. That was his breakfast and lunch. He didn't cook every day, he would cook enough for a couple of days. The most difficult thing was to hide his food from a fox that got into the habit of coming into his dugout. It had already eaten all of Fyodor's stocks twice.

Once a week he would wash his clothes in the water boiled in a pail on the stove, he also cut his hair and shaved with a razor-sharp knife. He had taken the pail, his favourite penknife, soap, salt and pots from his house the first time he left.

In the day, when the stove went out, he would pile fir branches on his dugout and throw some snow on the top. Then he would overturn a long log and carefully go across it to the bushes to the pathway, overturn the log again with the icy side up. After that he would go to the village. He needed to find out the latest news and get to uncle Yegor's house. There he could learn the news about the butter-making factory, about police goons, Germans and also about the guys who hadn't joined the police goons yet.

Astakhov climbed the red rock and stared at the landscape he had known from childhood: his village, bend, bridge and church's domes. The village was hardly alive. He could see two policemen in new black overcoats walk from the post-office. They were popping into the houses and writing something down into a big white notepad. Then he saw Verka Ignatieva walking towards them to school and carrying a big can of milk. At school there were headquarters of policemen from five neighbouring villages. Fyodor's mother was walking towards the Red Lighthouse with a can. She was ordered to bring fresh milk every day to the butter-making factory for the guards. She had to walk seven kilometres. She could hardly walk, she had bad legs...

Fyodor remembered himself coming to his mother's after he had escaped from captivity. She was crying and cheering up when she saw her son alive. She closed the curtains and locked the door. She put Fyodor's big sheepskin fur coat he had worn walking nearly from Kaunas home for more than five hundred kilometres into the hot Russian stove. The fur coat immediately became white of fried lice. She burned his blazer, shirt and peg-top trousers in a pot belly stove and got him some hot water. Fyodor washed the best he could straight there, in the room. His mother cleaned his arm wound with moonshine and banded it with a clean white towel. She got an old warm jumper, trousers and huge felt boots with rubbers, belonging to his father, from the attic. Fyodor ate cabbage soup without meat. He felt really good... His mother agreed with what he had decided to do here, in his native land...

2.

Living in a village, people get used to doing everything themselves from their childhood – carefully, neatly and for a long time. Fyodor knew all the hillocks in the glade near the farm house where they used to mow the

grass. He remembered every log when they transported their house from the farm to the village, on the bank of the Lemovzha... The nature only accepts people who belong to it. She doesn't tolerate others and rejects them.

The wheels of the state are different. They are usually there to change the nature. There are many people, a lot of factories and big goals. People have to do everything unfounded. If there are planes to be built, everyone must do it! If there is collectivization, every third person is accused of being wealthy. Every third person was accused of being a public enemy. If we were retreating, everyone was a panic-monger and coward, if there was captivity, everyone was a traitor. This machinery couldn't do differently... But Astakhov was on his own. He had no boss, no orders, no subordinates, no tribunal or power. Try to figure it out! What was to be done?

He knew what to do with the Germans. He had to act quietly and without showing off. It was war time and no villager would be curious, "Who is the hero who blew up the bridge or commandants office?" It was a usual thing. But everyone would be interested if one of them, who had always been living with them but had betrayed them, were punished rightly. For them it would be a triumph of justice. After that the other people, weak, faint-hearted and misguided, but not scums, as that one, would take thought.

It seemed clear. But Fyodor was plagued by doubts. He had new questions in his head. To start with, those were the questions to himself. Was he ready to be living and hiding in a dugout in the woods all on his own for months? He couldn't afford to get ill. Or be wounded. No one would help him. He couldn't stay in his parents' house even if his mother had tried to persuade him. They would know, sense, inform. How could he get about? Police patrols were hanging about the villages and checking passes. How could he look for assistants and soul mates? That was probably the most difficult part. They couldn't disappear even tempo-

rarily to commit sabotage. If they disappeared, their family would be killed. To leave with the family? But where?

The complicated thing was – could he offer anything to the villagers for them to choose to go with him? The Red Army had gone and left them. The leaflets thrown down from the planes saying the Red Army would return soon had a reverse effect. The new power was already there and it was acting roughly. The Germans were near, in Bolshoi Sabsk, just half an hour travel. They could arrive unexpectedly any time. Those were not just wandering in the village. They would pull everyone to the glade near the church and then search the houses in case someone was hiding. If they had a tiny suspicion, they would kill the whole family or even burn the village.

Everyone who lived there was entitled to think, “What if this country has lost the war, like Europe did? We were having Mongol-Tatar Yoke for a few centuries...” When wounded Astakhov and other captives were being taken in a carriage to the German home front, many people were thinking like that, “When they take Moscow and Leningrad, they will let us go!” That was simple force subjection and non-resistance, a type of conscience when people started digesting easily an external force command. This being said, it doesn’t matter what force it was, ours or foreign. People were just following its will.

What could he oppose to that? Only actions! Active actions against that external force. Again and again he had to answer the same question, “On my own or in a team?” As soon as Fyodor returned to that question, a pile of other problems would spout up like mushrooms after rain. “Shall I look for guerillas or besieged troops? Shall I wander around the woods and wait for them? No! I have walked so long and never met any guerillas. I wouldn’t just join any of them, anyway. I learned my lesson. I’ve seen a lot of them, wandering around...” The

circumstances demanded him acting on his own, without counting on any help for a long time.

What did the locals need, the locals whose children and husbands were already in the police and serving Germans? What did policemen need? They were all so different. He had to look for what separated them. Some of them needed just to survive. For others it was living. For people like Klyonov it was a chance of toading to the new regime, becoming rich and having power over people...

Some people hated the Soviets so much they saw Germans as their saviors. In his village there were no people like that. Now he had to make them realize that if they became scums they would be killed. They had to know punishment would follow everyone.

Astakhov seemed to become both a judge and an executioner. Who allowed him to, who empowered him, who had just been captured and just escaped being shot by the insiders?

All of a sudden Fyodor felt a clarity of mind, free from any ideological waste, army instructions and reflexes, everything casual and introduced. He was to report to his own conscience. Today he had to kill enemies. How well did his country do it? Did it love him or reject him? It was certainly important. But he tried not to take any notice of that. The most important thing was to drive the enemy out of his land. To drive as much as he could. To kill, harm and interfere. In doing so he would be helping his family, his wife, little son, mother...

Later on people's memory would start working. It would extract all details of betrayal and untruth from the past. Their imagination would form those details into living forms. After that their conscience would wake up. Not the false conscience of a slave who had lost his personality but the true one, which made people think, take decisions and act.

3.

Standing on the rock, Fyodor could see his mum meet Dmitrievna, who lived on her own but policemen would often call for moonshine. Sometimes they would drink it in her house and carry on. While they were drinking, they would chat about their business, about who had got a promotion, who had been hung, who had been sent somewhere and who was the boss. That sort of thing. Every time mother met Dmitrievna, she stopped, said hello to her and waited for her to pour her heart out and show off her knowledge.

Near the church there stood an open carriage with a horse. People of Khotnezha and Koriacha were making their way there. There would be an announcement for them. "I wonder who has come. It's not Klyonov, is it?" Fyodor was dreaming. That one didn't go anywhere without guards. Last time when the Germans had come and shot the miller near the church, they gathered everyone as well. But then there were only Klyonov-junior and Osipov.

Two hours later everyone went. It was quiet again. At night he could walk along the road, come up to a house of a police goon in the village and feel what sort of person he was. Usually none of them slept until 2 o'clock in the morning. They all seemed to be waiting for something. Then he took his time checking the route from one village to another, back ways and getaways. To track down the head policemen he had to know quite a lot. Where did they go? Why and when? What weapons did they have? Did they have guards? The butter-making factory was a different story. Fyodor had already found out how to get there and how to set it afire. Now he needed to suss out what guards there were, where they were and how many barrels of oil there were at the warehouse. Besides, not far from there, in Sabask, there was a German unit. It would be a good idea to get some information about it.

Around 2 o'clock in the morning or even later Fyodor usually returned to his dugout. He would fire up the stove, warm up his food and go to bed. The next day, or the same day to be exact, he would have a difficult day. He found out that in the morning policeman Osipov would walk to his family along the river Luga. He didn't know whether he would go on his own or with his mate Petka Klyonov. But he knew Osipov never walked on his own. He always had two or three guards with him.

Over the tops of the pine-trees there hung a huge lead canopy of the sky. There were no stars... Another minute - and the woods and the sky ran into one another. Snowflakes were falling on his face and melting. Fyodor stopped. It was quiet. No sound, no rustle. A tree creaked about somewhere. Then it was quiet again. Astakhov didn't feel comfortable in the ear-piercing silence. He was carefully walking forward, towards the road. The snow was betraying him with its crunching but the woods were extinguishing all the sounds.

About twenty metres from the place where he stopped two people with guns, in warm sheepskin jackets and fur hats were walking along the snowy road-side. Those were Klyonov and Osipov who had shot two guerillas and then pulled the wounded Gypsy boy in view of the villagers and killed him. Next to and behind them there were three other people with guns.

If only those creatures had known how long he had been looking for them! He had been preparing, watching for hours but they would be walking a different route! Then he would have had to run across the deep snow another ten kilometres to capture them in a different place. He needed them to be together and far away from the village to avoid suspecting the locals...

Walking across the deep snow in the tracks, both policemen were walking in single file. In silence the shot sounded very loudly. Klyonov fell on the ground

straight away and went quiet, but the second one must have been wounded. The three guards obviously lost courage and fussed. Two of them that had been behind, rushed to flee without shouting. The third man lay down and without aiming started shooting in the woods where Astakhov was hiding. A minute later he grasped something, jumped up and ran after the other two towards the nearest village. Fyodor didn't recognize any of them. He waited for the three guards to run further away, then he came up closer to the road. Osipov was half-sitting and half-lying unnaturally and trying to rack the slide of his gun.

"So, it's our people," he muttered when he recognized Astakhov.

"Oh, yes," Fyodor said harshly and finished him off with the gun-butt. He didn't say and didn't explain anything. Just finished him off! He didn't feel anything apart from a squeamish sensation of touching a rotten skunk.

He took the guns and pulled the bodies of the policemen to the river. He didn't want them to be found. But they did. The jacket of one of them swelled from an air-hole. When the Germans and policemen looked for them, it was the jacket they found them by. After that they arranged a funeral with honours and fireworks. Some high-ranked Germans came. They buried the two bastards at the Hotnezha cemetery. They must have appreciated their hard work. They didn't touch any locals. They just walked in line into the woods around the nearest villages. Not far. Just five kilometres deep into the woods.

His mother said that the women she met in the country road, Dmitrievna and Verka Ignatieva, shared their impressions of that event, meaningly showed their heads somewhere up. Their faces expressed both fear and joy, which they couldn't hide.

Mistake Corrections

There was a dark silhouette of a school building standing out in the background of the starlit sky. That moonshiny March night two guys were seen climbing a high birch tree to the staff room on the third floor. When they got to the precious window, they quietly opened the top part of it with a penknife. The smallest boy, Petka Philippov, nicknamed "Philya", climbed in through it and opened the rest of the window from the inside. Two more guys were hiding below, in the lilac bushes, and were watching the school yard. After the first pair had disappeared into the room they also began to climb up from one branch to another, rushing to take part in the great affair of "mistake corrections".

Yurka Lisochkin, the boy with thick brown hair that was second to climb into the staff room, was bigger than the first one and was wearing a short jacket and a blue scarf. Having found himself in the dark room, he threw himself onto a chair and stared at the wall. Two months ago he was standing in the exact same place in front of the teachers and promising not to skip lessons. That day he was also staring at the wall where there hung a big portrait of a bloke with a round face. Tonight the moon would light the room, then suddenly get obscured with the tree branches moving in the wind, slide on Kchrushev's bald head, stop for a while and disappear. The boy appeared to be stroking the big head of the Head of the country and praying to him, "Please don't tell anyone. OK? Please don't!"

At that time Philippov had already found a big wooden bookcase in the far corner near the door, and started touching all its boards with his thin fingers as if they were violin strings. At last he found the lock, pushed it with a crow bar and the door opened. The form registers were standing on the shelves in even levels. On the binding, he could see the form numbers painted in white oil.

"Wait for us!" a blonde boy in a light coloured coat and cap shouted, he was Serezhka Bogdanov, the third out of the teenagers who got inside through the opened window. When climbing through the window sill, he overturned a pile of exercise-books and was now trying to put them back.

The fourth boy, who had hair as black as tar and was wearing a school uniform and a scarf round his neck, Vovka Spivak, bumped into Bogdanov, who was picking up the exercise books from the floor, and fell off the window sill. His leg got stuck between the wall and the desk and was now struggling to climb out from there.

"Shhh!" snapped the boy that was sitting on the chair and "stroking" the bald head of the outstanding leader, then he turned to Philippov dealing with the registers and added confidently, "We've got to take several of them, otherwise they will know."

The boys walked around the staff room celebrating the victory over all the teachers in the country in their mind. The fact that they were in the enemy's headquarters dazzled them. Everything interested and attracted them. What's on the desks? What's in the drawers? Whose exercise books? They could hardly see anything because of the darkness, though.

Along the windows of the staff room there were desks and lots of chairs. Under them there lay women's shoes carelessly. On the other side of the room there stood bookcases different in shape and height with half glass doors. In the stuffy room it smelt of shoes and wet chalk.

Without waiting for his partners, skinny Petka Philipov in a new school blazer with its collar cut off in the Beatles style, grabbed seven registers in brown faux leather from the right end with a single movement, tucked them under his shirt and rushed back to the window. Now he could feel with every cell in his skinny body that he owned the most important documents of the modern times. It was that Talmud of form 7B that condemned all four participants of the secret affair to finishing the term with a mark "3" and even threatened him with a "2" in Maths. Now everything would change! Now they would have a chance!

Suddenly, they heard shuffling footsteps quickly approaching in the hallway. It could only be the DT teacher. All the pupils at the school liked him. Vasiliych would let them stay in the workshop and make something whenever they wanted. Just for themselves. He, being a war invalid and having lost his left arm at the front, would spend his nights mostly at school, near the shooting gallery, and had no family of his own. The boys would see him in the basement many times when they wandered there without a torch or matches. But today as unlucky as they were, he happened to be on the third floor during their act of rebellion. They were not ready for that. They had no backup plan, no plan of escape. They started panicking. Everyone saw Vovka Spivak, now not being scared of making any noise, with a loud crack of a broken desk leg get out of the trap between the wall and the desk and jump on the window-sill a second later.

All the exercise books that Serezhka had just folded in a pile fell down again. Bogdanov could clearly hear Spivak shout, "Watch out! Run!" Vovka, without wasting time to look for support, was very fast, like a monkey, climbing down while jumping from one branch to another, using just his arms. Once he was on the ground, he quickly got up and ran.

One second later, holding with his hands the registers hidden under his blazer, small Philka climbed the window sill. How easy it had been to climb up the tree and get into the window! It was a different story to climb down. He didn't have any time to calculate the trajectory or walk step by step on the narrow moulding. Without thinking, the boy long jumped straight onto the birch tree, deciding to grab the nearest thick twig. His blazer got torn by the little twigs, the registers fell to the ground and he himself hung on the twig unable to reach the nearest branch or the tree trunk. Being annoyed or frightened and in pain, he whined not daring to call for help loudly.

The room was still dark. Bogdanov was in the far corner of the big room, behind the bookcases, and didn't see anyone, and Yurka Lisochkin was waiting impatiently for Philya to climb down the window. When he couldn't wait any longer, he hid behind the heavy curtain. The same second the light switched on in the staff room.

Serega understood he would be found any moment, so he rushed to the furthest bookcase with globes and maps, opened one of its doors, got out a black globe with white stars, got himself between the two bottom shelves and covered himself with a badly folded map of the Arctics. He doubled up and managed to close the bookcase door with the end of his boot. Only one door. His heart was beating so loudly that he was thinking of getting out of his hiding place. He would be heard and found anyway.

Outside the window they could hear Petka Philipov's whining and sniffing.

Having entered the staff room, Vasililych stopped for a second, then he turned and flicked the light switch, which was to the left of the door. The big room became bright at once. Over the row of the desks there shone the window glass. Only one of them was black and the cold spring air was bursting into the room. From behind the window the teacher could hear someone weeping. He walked to

the window quickly and confidently, looked out of it and saw the boy hanging on his weakening arms. He bent over, leaning on the window sill.

"Hey!.. Hold on, just a moment!" the teacher couldn't find anything suitable at hand so he bent over the window and clinging his toes to the iron radiator stretched his arm to the lad. "Hold on! Can you reach? Come on! Come on! A bit more..." He didn't even think about what his pupil was doing there and what was going on. The main thing was to pull that skinny boy back in or he would fall and kill himself. Down on the ground there lay a stack of concrete kerb stones prepared by the builders in winter for the future pavement. A long line of light was falling on the stones through the brightly lit window. The shadow play made them even more scary.

At that very time the boy hiding behind the curtain got out and sneakily started walking around Vasiliych trying to leave the ill-fortunate staff room, go the the corridor and there... Vasiliych heard someone's steps behind his back and, still bending over the window-sill and stretching his arm to Petka Philippov, he turned his head towards the light...

"Lisochkin, what are you doing here?" he said harshly when he recognized his pupil.

Everything was knocked down like a house of cards. At first he was so lucky! All he had to do was to quietly leave the crime scene... Now he had been recognized. That was it! A huge charge of anger overfilled his conscience and suddenly shot towards himself, little Philya who was still squeaking behind the window, the disabled DT teacher with three shiny blocks on the lapel of his worn-out blazer...

Without understanding what he was doing, Yurka slipped behind the curtain again. The teacher turned and made a sidestep. The curtain suddenly stretched and pulled the massive wooden pole with the screws from the

plastered wall. Maybe, the teacher had trod on the heavy burgundy curtain. Or...

One end of the pole hit Lisochkin's head, after which the other end fell on Vasiliych' neck with even stronger force. The centre of gravity moved, the teacher's legs came off the parquet floor and lifted up... A second later the teacher disappeared behind the window...

Petka could see his body weaken, bend over the window bay, slide down the wall. He didn't even try to grab the skirting of the birch-tree branches. He fell on the stones and didn't move.

Frightened from what he had just seen and instinctively trying to do a runner and disappear, Philya tried to swing as much as he could on the branch, let his arms go, leapt to another branch below, but he couldn't get hold of it, and so slipped to the third one and in the end fell... It was not that high but he still hurt himself. As he limped and covered his stomach with his white shirt, reddish stains of blood appeared through his shirt, and he got close to Vasilyich. The wide open motionless eyes were looking at the boy and they were the eyes which reflected the bright light from the third floor window. Some dark liquid was flowing under the teacher's head, in all directions. Petka touched the puddle of blood with his finger and smelt it. Then he smelt his wet and bloody palm, jumped up and was about to run. But in a moment he changed his mind. Suddenly he remembered that in the eyes of the departed there left an image of the last person he saw while alive. So squatting near the motionless body, without realizing what he was doing, the lad began to rub Vasilyich' eyes frantically with his palm. After some time, he calmed down and realized that it was ok as he had managed to destroy the evidence or maybe having just thought it was silly, so he got up, looked around and walked away quickly, bending over and hobbling.

After that Lisochkin appeared in the window. Slowly he sat on the window sill with his back to the staff room, touched his head with his hand, then raised his palm to his face and looked at it. Staggering, he walked along the border of the wall. On the border there was thin ice and the boy slid a few times but he didn't fall. He got to the tree and slowly, stopping once or twice, climbed down from one branch to another, until he reached the ground. There around the birch-tree he could see the registers lying around, and further along, on the long stones the DT teacher was lying with his right leg clumsily turned. His eyes and cheeks were stained with blood. Lisochkin didn't approach him. He didn't pick up the registers, he just took a couple of those which were lying nearby. He looked around once more and disappeared in the darkness.

Only an hour later the last of the boys left the staff room. Down below he saw the same dreadful scene. He couldn't think straight but he thought he should get some help. How could he do that? He had been standing for a few minutes over the DT teacher's body and hesitating but he couldn't think of anything so he headed home.

Providence Bay

Tomorrow will be the solar eclipse. It is here, in Kamchatka and Chukotka, that the Moon shadow will touch the Earth, cross the Bering Strait, then move along Alaska shores and reach the north of Canada. Polar explorers, scientists and locals, Aeroflot's north route passengers, are in a rush. Some are rushing home, some to work, some to see the solar eclipse. But the North wouldn't be itself if it didn't make allowances into the plans and dreams of every person who happens to be here.

The people have been sitting in Anadyr for a week and every two hours they can hear the same thing, "Flight Anadyr - Providence, departure delayed due to weather conditions. Flight Anadyr - Magadan, departure delayed due to weather conditions... Flight..." The same thing in all directions.

People unwittingly start going into the twists and turns of the new science for them - meteorology. They hope to nose out a dreadful mystery of the weather which will take place in three or even five days. At least they won't have to wake up and listen attentively to the old loudspeaker whispering something from the dirty wall in the corner of the hall.

The word "sitting" doesn't really reflect reality. Most people have nothing to sit on. The lucky ones who have nestled down on a couple dozen chairs are sitting without standing up, pushing hard on their sacrum and forming an obtuse angle with their body - as long as

they could stretch out their legs. If they get up and go to the loo – that is it! The place would be lost. At night, to make their blood stream back from their legs, people carefully lift them up and place them on the shoulders and backs of those who are sitting in front of them, after which they fall asleep straight away. From the side it looks like slow motion of football fans chanting at a match when they are doing a Mexican wave standing up and lifting their arms and then sitting back down again. In the morning when the crackling sounds of the loud-speaker wakes everyone up on the dark coats and jackets of the people sitting “in the stalls” there are clearly seen light marks of the heels. But no one takes any notice.

Many people lie down on the cold stone floor on an underlaid newspaper and stretch out their legs delightedly. Some manage to take place in a ticket-booth. The floor there is wooden and plywood partitions protect from the dreadful mixture smells of cheap spirits from the airport buffet and long-worn boots, shoes, socks and footcloths.

In the morning people not “from the stalls” can go outside and walk around the two-storey wooden building of the airport. The amazing thing is they can’t see the colourful nature around them or feel the fresh air, everything looks grey and foggy to them, as if the Moon couldn’t wait for its time and has already obstructed the bright sun rays. In fact, it is the result of the protective mechanism working. The permanent uncertainty and knowing there is no way out don’t let the human receptors switch on. Not to relax before the continuing ordeal, the human nature blurs over the bright colours, smoothens the lie of the ground and creates something similar to an invisible shell around. People can only distinctly hear the roar of the engines of the air fighters taking off and landing. Military planes don’t care. Whether the weather is good or bad, they always fly.

On the floor in the far corner of the hall there are two men. One is a chemist, a blond slim lad, he graduated seven days ago, he was allocated to the Institute of Arctics and from there he was urgently sent to join an expedition.

The other man is an electrical navigator. He is older, with a beer belly, obviously married and well-groomed. He has been living with his family in the North for ten years but this time he is flying from Leningrad where he got instructions on the coming ice patrol in the Chukchee Sea. Generally, he was in the northern capital by transit, he was returning from his holiday to the Black Sea where most of the money earned in the Arctic Circle is normally poured down the drain.

They were sitting on an artificial clearing made of the unfolded "Leningradskaya Pravda", tucking into their dry home sandwiches with Krakow sausage and examining the map of the area of their ice patrol. The chemist accidentally looked at the newspaper black and white picture near the paper bag with food. The picture showed the geographical position of the zone of the total sun eclipse which was taking place the next day. The dark zone nearly completely clashed with the zone of their coming navigation, marked in dotted line on the navigator's map. The beginning polar explorer was surprised, alarmed and even frightened. At least, he stopped chewing, but he didn't say a word.

Tomorrow would be the sun eclipse. This is something that no one can ever cancel. That is probably why a flurry started at the airport. In spite of the weather they started getting a plane ready for the scientists from the Pulkovo observatory. For the latest week the scientists had accustomed here, in the forced Providence deprived shelter. And now, you see, they needed to fly! They finally remembered! The military planes flew, didn't they? So they could as well. Literally, deadly reasoning!

The navigator was a polar explorer with experience. He used to fly the route Amderma – Tiksi – Dikson – Anadyr. He knew that in extreme situation it was always better to look like big boss. Today his shiny bald head, neat beard, white shirt and trendy striped tie allowed him to boldly climb aboard the plane getting ready to take off. Pushing the young specialist with suitcases in front of him and getting through the crowd of surprised astronomers, he would now and again say importantly, “Ladies and gentlemen, tomorrow we are watching the eclipse from the vessel in the Chukchee Sea. It’s colossal responsibility, you know!”

The small plane accommodated fifteen people and a dozen boxes with fresh eggs. It took off easily, with hardly any run-up, soared over the ground and a moment later rose above the impermissibly low continuous dark clouds. The bright sun hit the portholes. It broke through the endless sequence to repeating events day after day. It seemed like everything happened before that was hidden behind a veil and looked grey or black and white.

An hour later everyone clung to the portholes at the same time. Below the plane they could see a polar village at the foot of snowy mountains. They surrounded the azure Providence Bay on most sides. After the airport in Anadyr it looked like Sochi! The same colours, the same mountains and the smell of the sea. But the sea itself was cold and not so salty, although it showed all the colours of the bright north sky. They could see a small white ship at the pier of the port, which complemented the wonderful scenery. At last all the crew of the ice patrol had gathered together. From now on for five months their home would be a fragile looking ship with a simple name “Lighthouse”. That morning everyone was getting ready for departure and forgot about the eclipse. The nature reminded them of it. Suddenly it got as dark as twilight and the sun sickle, overshadowed by

the Moon, was slowly disappearing. At parting it flamed like a diamond ring and set afire a flaring necklace. The stars could be seen now. A minute or two passed and the bright sun returned its azure colour to the northern sea. The nature mystery disappeared as suddenly as it came out. The white ship left the pier without any hurry, emphasizing its significancy.

The sailors and expedition members – Naval school students, hydrologists, oceanologists and chemistry students – were located in big cabins in the prow, the heads near the stern, the young specialist and the navigator being now old friends settled in a two-berth cabin, in the middle. Their work started. Some of them had just returned to full life. Being at home, they had felt like a fish out of water, or like being an early demobilized officer or a released jailbird. Others, “accountants”, started drawing calendars, counting days to their return and money they would get after the expedition – their salary, allowances and an extra index for the Providence Bay being a homeport.

A week passed. There was no ice barrier to be seen and they didn't have to fight the icy deck. The sea was just swelling. Nevertheless, for most expedition members the beauty of the North had died. In the hydro-chemical laboratory, apart from the young specialist from Leningrad – he was called the chief chemist – there worked two students. Those two stayed in a big cabin with the hydrologists. The chemists didn't have to wake up very often at night, only when the vessel stopped. That's why they slept on the top berths.

It was impossible to sleep because of the ship motions. The flowery curtains hanging on the hooks were moving with a rattle up and down the metal pole fixed to the ceiling. They were going up and down according to the rhythm of a rolling motion. Suddenly pitching motions added to that and the curtains now were also

swinging. Left and right, left and right... Now and again it would stop, then the usual harmony of sickness would break but then recommence with greater force. When he was free from his shift time, the navigator would usually sit at the table, smoke strong cigarettes and burn out patterns from the Chukchee epos on walrus tusks with a thin burning hot needle.

On the aft, in the saloon, where the heads had their meals, it didn't rock that much but the sickness would shape up invisibly and gradually. It was difficult to follow it. It was much better to eat food quickly together with the sailors. Particularly when it was closer to cabins. They had a bowl of soup and a piece of wet brown bread in the left hand and a spoon in the right hand. Everything got eaten in one minute. Second helpings were a waste of food. So was the second course. It was important to take a horizontal position as soon as possible. Then at least something would be digested.

Usually they would lie down for ten minutes. They couldn't hold it in any longer, and had to run to the latrine. Not to the deck as it was often described in books, but to a latrine. On the deck the recently consumed dinner would be followed by the person himself. But in the latrine everything was sweet. It was impossible to fall anywhere and no one would see you. But even here, in order to not get splashed, people had to know when exactly to bend down over the hole. They didn't learn it at once, it came with an experience – with intuition, familiar sounds of the engine and bubbling in the pipes, when people could sense with their whole body the speed of the ship falling from the top of the wave.

After that they could go “home”, to their berth.

The portholes were battened down. The doors in all cabins were open to let the air in. Alas! The air from the engine room travelled faster. The remarkable thing was that it was not going to end in an hour or tomorrow.

row, for example. It would happen the day after tomorrow, in a month or two...

Two months passed. The life content was to look for the ice barrier by all means and inform all vessels about that; also to scientifically survey, measure the current speed in various depths and oil pollution, to assess the temperature and saltiness of water, oxygen, silicon and other chemical elements content. Then based on those figures geographers would make promising scientific conclusions.

After the ship had been to the northern part of the Bering Sea and made nearly fifty stops for measuring, it returned to the village of Providence for a short time. They restocked water, fuel, got piles of letters and two days later, still with a swinging walk, they found themselves in the centre of a cyclone, now on the border of the East Siberian Sea and the Chukchee Sea, near Herald Island. They had to make a quick decision about what to do now. They didn't get any orders. The zone marked with a dotted line on the map was just a reference. The members of the expedition, temporarily attached to the hydrographic vessel "Lighthouse" for five or six months, at last had finished their meeting. Seven people: hydrologists, chemists, oceanologists and their democratically spirited head – had been thinking what to do. To stay where they were or to go to the Beaufort sea? On the one hand, it was really pleasant to lie at anchor in the middle of the De Long Strait between Wrangel Island and the mainland. The depth of the water was only thirty to forty metres. It meant they only had to sample water from six sea-lines every five hours. That was it! For two months! There were no motions... That was the main thing. Surely they could later put the results of their measurements into complicated formulae describing nuances of various currents in this pretty place and contribute to the Arctics study.

Besides, the weather was wonderful! In the daytime there were bright colours everywhere: the azure sea and blue whales, opaque walruses and shiny seals. At night there was the northern light. It would be nice to land somewhere at a small river mouth, catch salmon and shoot ducks. Later on they could smoke and fry all that. They would eat enough caviar for life.

What was on the other hand?

If they turned right, then went north, check how far the ice barrier was, then they could go to the Beaufort Sea at full speed. And there... Over Alaska and Canada there was an expanse for stardust and science. Firstly, after the 15th of September the sailing directions didn't recommend to call in there. No one did. It was dangerous. The ice would come up to Point Barrow and cover the sea exit. Secondly, it was the sea depth! Three thousand metres. That was a hundred times more. No bottles would be enough for samples of water. They would have to work literally all the time breaking all their shifts. Of course, if there was no ice, the motions would be bad, it was not a place for romanticism, however...

They had been discussing it for a long time but from the very beginning everyone was for the act of bravery. Four of them were sitting on the floor. Three were at the table. The ones sitting on the floor thought that it was rocking less. They would run out, come back and run out again in turns.

They decided to go to the north, to look how far the ice barrier was. Then they could think. It turned out to be quite far. That was that. The north stardust and a polar explorer's duty turned out stronger than physiology. Especially when during the latest sun eclipse that very water area was shadowed by the moon, as the chief chemist found out. It looked like a coincidence. But it was attracting, there was something mystical about it.

However, it was not surprising that it was the chemist who paid attention to the coincidence. Chemistry is mere magic, too. If someone decided to peep into the vessel hydrochemical laboratory... What if that trick took into someone's head – to breathe in ammonia or hydrochloric acid vapours, the first thing their eye caught would be plastic bottles. Hundreds of small containers filled with water from different layers. They would be everywhere – on the shelves, tables, deck and in the pockets of strange-coloured and burnt with acid lab coats hanging on hooks. Somewhere in the middle of that would be a crooked shaggy wizard/chemist. He only lacked a big black hood. He would be sucking in one sort of liquid from a bottle through a pipette into his mouth and a moment later just about spitting out a completely different one into a bucket on the floor. If the ship motions had been going on all his shift, his eyes wouldn't be able to see the photocolimeter readings and the light green stripes intercrossing on the small screen would be shaking, flashing and turning into a grey continuous blur.

Carrying out the decision of the team of like-minded people, the "Lighthouse" roamed the length and breadth of the "foreign" Beaufort Sea and even reached as far as the Mackenzie River mouth. All of a sudden, without announcing anything, the captain turned back to the home Chukchee Sea. Why? Was he frightened of the American plane which had been circling the vessel and waving its wings yesterday? What was there to be scared of? They were in the international waters.

The Americans must have been alarmed much more when they found a small Russian vessel near the northern coast of Alaska in late autumn. "Why? Idiots! The sailing directions are an international document. It says clearly there. What shall we do with them if they have to winter on the ice?"

Everything turned out simpler and more complicated at the same time. The boatswain got ill. His throat was inflamed so much it was impossible to breathe. There was no doctor. They couldn't consult on the radio as there was no connection. They had to turn around and go to the Bering Strait at full speed. Barely made it! The ice barrier had come up to the Point Barrow. If the boatswain hadn't got ill, the mystic adventure would have ended in forced wintering. That didn't catch up with the schedule of the expedition or its members.

And they had had enough of it, honestly! They had had the same thing for five months! Dry potatoes, tinned beetroot soup, always damp bread and salty salmon. They started dreaming of motionless ground, live phone conversation with families and fried pork. Early in the morning the smell of the bread fried in butter gathered everyone in the cook-room, both the people who went on the watch and those who could sleep. One of the sailors was cooking croutons out of damp bread before the start of his dog watch. A lot of them! Enough for everyone.

That morning no one was in bed and they were in no mood for croutons. They were waiting to approach a big vessel to hand over the boatswain. They were waiting to see and hear anything new and unusual, high in demand by the nature of people roaming in the Arctic Ocean literally without any radio connection for months. They could judge the changes in the world only by the American map of ice conditions their electric navigator managed to pick up for free when the "Lighthouse" was passing the Alaska coast.

The voice of the big vessel's captain was exactly what they were waiting for. It burst into the pilot room from above, from the side and even from below and sounded indifferent, hoarse and boozed.

"Come closer from the left, don't be scared, I'm telling you!"

"It's easy to say – don't be scared!" the cockswain uttered aloud.

Sure enough, as soon as the vessels collided with their boards, one of the two row boats burst into pieces. What did the "board" mean? The small vessel had a board, but the big one had a metal wall stiffed with luminous portholes. Some fifth or tenth deck of the "giant" caught up with the crumpled highest deck of the "Lighthouse". The boatswain was standing near the railing. Two sailors were supporting him. He made a step and the same moment he was caught up and pulled on the iron vessel. The next second, blocks of Bulgarian cigarettes and small sacks with Japanese onions were thrown to the "Lighthouse". Everyone knew the ice patrol vessels never had anything. They must have already eaten all their stocks apart from the dried potatoes and salty salmon. They were Arctic hermits. They lived in their own world, went where they wanted to go and put in once in three months. The main thing was that they informed where ice was. Everyone needed that. They were felt sorry for and they were respected.

Now it was time to go home! But a storm blew up with renewed vigour and wouldn't let the "Lighthouse" turn around. The vessel, aiming straight for the north, was helplessly operating its power supply units full blast. The energy was just enough to stay in the same place in spite of the gale.

The captain tried to take a risk twice and turn the vessel around, but all in vain. The alarm was raised and to the loud discontinuous hoots everyone would put on wadded jackets, trapper hats, warm boots, take all documents with them, beautifully embroidered seal slippers – gifts for their families from Leningrad – and go on the rocking deck flooded with icy water.

Inexplicable phenomenon! Everyone knew very well five minutes outside the vessel meant death! The water was

seven degrees below zero, they wouldn't be able to survive longer. Warm clothes didn't have anything to do with that. Even in summer, on a calm sunny day, the team spent twenty minutes to get a simple wooden box thrown into the sea for training purposes. However, both the team and expedition continued playing the "saving game" tamely.

Early in the morning everyone woke up because there were no motions. The vessel had laid at anchor near the shore protected with a huge rock from the storm. The night before the executive officer had turned the vessel tail down to leeward without notifying anyone. Five hours later it successfully passed Cape Dezhnev, Big Diomedes Island and on seeing the Faraway Rock, it first hid in a small strait, then entered the Providence Bay and lay out. Success is never blamed!

When there are no ship motions everyone feels hungry. Around five people got on deck, under canvas found barrels with gherkins and sauerkraut, fixed to the floor, and tucked into them, without even bread. The others headed to the cook-room for the donated Japanese onions. Just as the pressure in the submarine compartments levels up, so people's guts run down by endless ship motions, demanded immediate substitution of the boring daily ration for something savoury and fresh. The same thing, as the surrounding nature after the storm had stilled.

The same grey colours of the sea and sky, constant smell of solar oil, tins of food and ever-present gastric juice had disappeared somewhere overnight. That dreadful mixture had been following them all the time. In July the sun covered by the moon didn't shine there for only two minutes. It took them months of suffering to get round the water surface marked by the sun eclipse. Now, when they had left the bewitched circle of the three northern seas, everyone seemed to have woken up. It looked like the eclipse had just taken place. Their eyes were shining, people started talking again. Their eye-

sight had come back to life – that was a sure sign. At the background of the turquoise sea there suddenly appeared bright blue colours of the rocks still melting into the sky. Now and again the Sun would flash for a second between the heavy clouds sliding fast over the sea. Then the blue would be pierced with lots of breaking light rays, the shore and the water would be filled with warm orange tints, become friendly and attractive. However, the wind wasn't going to calm down. In the narrow cleft between the coastal cliffs it was ripping a thick layer of water off the calming sea and making a haze of millions of splashes. But it wasn't strong enough to create waves.

It was time for a special ritual. Stumbling in the strong wind and holding onto each other in order not to fall overboard, the “zombified aliens” were coming out. They were pale, smelling of chemical agents and sick, wearing trapper hats, wadded jackets, slippers, wool socks and burnt with acid blue sagging joggers. Walking in line, the chemists were dragging heavy boxes with metal corners for laboratory containers and unused chemicals. A moment later they lifted their arms and let the boxes fall into the water as the last symbol of the past.

In the end of the expedition everyone remembered about the chemists for some reason. Maybe, that was because all that time no one had really seen any of them. Who were they? Clearly not sailors, hydrologists or oceanologists. They couldn't be the people who used to dream of the sea, storms and travels in their childhood. They found themselves there, on the edge of the Earth, accidentally, by allocation after graduation or by taking an opportunity to earn a lot of money. It is lucky if in the very beginning of the independent life journey the expedition didn't become a sun eclipse but will be remembered as a bright and important event. Later on in life everyone would have to try their own strength. If they knew their limit, it was always easier in life.

Meeting

Maximum security penal colony UT No.189/33 was located in the Ural taiga, two hundred kilometres from Perm on the railway from Nizhniy Tagil to Perm. The camp had a territory of approximately five hundred by five hundred metres, surrounded by the woods, with an alarmed razor wired fence.

An officer on duty occupied a booth over the camp. In colonies like this there were usually not so many prisoners, about seventy or eighty. At the same time, in No.6, which was a penal colony, located just a few hundred metres away from No.189/33, there were about three thousand prisoners.

From the camp outside Leningrad Vladimir Spivak was transferred to Perm, but not to "Perm-33" as he was supposed to under sentence – to No.6. The local administration must have thought he was transferred to another camp under article 209 (parasitism). His documents under article 190-1 had not been delivered to the special unit. No one knew that Spivak, a scum and evil, a notorious dissident as well, loved "Hamlet" and was crazy about the underworld language Francois Villon, the main bandit and last poet of French Middle Ages.

It happens sometimes. He wouldn't shout about it.

The whole group of people under arrest, where Vladimir belonged to, was sent for an isolation period. Officially prisoners adapt there to the camp conditions. He knew that from the last camp where he had spent two months.

For twelve to seventeen days that the newcomers stay in isolation, the staff are meant to shave their hair, wash them, give them work clothes, test and introduce them to the colony. But this only happens on paper and without prisoners' participation.

In the police van Vovka realized something was wrong when one of the security guards said they had bad luck and that was the end of the game. "What do you mean - bad luck?" Vovka thought. But he couldn't ask security guards questions. He didn't have to wait long. As soon as he jumped out of the police van, he was showered with a hail of blows. He started running, followed by kicks and blows, until he got to a room for an isolation period. He could feel how scared everyone was, including himself. Two prisoners were taken somewhere upstairs. Four people were standing at the wall, with their arms and legs apart. An officer was hitting them with a baton trying to make them spread their legs. He asked, "Are there any reds?" Two of them said, "Yes," and were taken to a room, then somewhere upstairs. The other two stayed, Vovka and another man who he didn't remember. Where did he come from? He looked like a Kirghiz, small and skinny. The tension was growing.

Another question was asked, "Are there any offenders?" The other prisoner also went to the room and then upstairs. Spivak was left alone and understood that was the end of him. Someone said, "Looks like you are without an occupation." He didn't know what it meant so he kept silent. He was hit again and taken to another room. He was feeling like a scared animal when he had to run between the two rows of officers, hit by batons and kicked hard. When he was kicked on his leg he fell but could feel the blows continue. He heard someone's furious voice, "Get up, scum bag!" Struggling to get up, he ran to the end of the corridor. He could hear someone's cry of despair from the room he was being pushed in. When he

was about to run into the room he noticed someone's body in blood lying near the door. Inside all of the newcomers were squatting on the floor of the room, which was three by three metres, with scuffed brick walls. The officers would take each of them by the scuff of the neck and lead him to the table covered with a red cloth. On the tablecloth there were paper forms which the prisoners needed to sign. Vovka saw the officers beat up one of the prisoners in the corner of the room. They were not just beating him up, they were stamping on him, because he refused to sign the form. After a long procedure of "agreement" the poor bloke was carried out. Now it was Spivak's turn.

Vovka was thinking of signing it unwittingly but he knew that would be the end of his dissident career. When he was led to the table he took the three pieces of paper and crumpled them up proudly and threw them on the floor. Spivak followed the papers in the nick of time. The blows on his head were so strong he thought they had a hammer. Vovka lost consciousness.

He woke up in a concrete crypt with a small light bulb on the ceiling behind a railing and water on the floor. Having seen him move, the officers of the isolation room picked him up and started beating him up again methodically. Their calm worsened the situation. It was not an outrage of feelings, it was their everyday work, like painting a wall with a lunch break.

Vovka was feeling the "personality amputation" his father had told him about. It felt like being dragged face down on the rubble and losing his own features. He could notice it after being on his own for a long time. He couldn't go for a walk or wash, there was just a small window in the cell, they fed him every other day, the light bulb was so dull he couldn't see anything. He didn't get any warm clothes. In the corner of the cell there was a stinking piss-hole, which smelt unbearable.

The first forty eight hours Vovka could differ day from night. In the day time he would walk back and forth and at night he tried to sleep. But the monotony, cold and hunger took their course, added by bad headaches after beating up. His muscles shrunk and didn't stretch after bad injuries. He had lumps the size of eggs on his back and shoulders. Without moving his body the lumps collected liquid in them. They were growing and hurting. He knew he had to move his arms and legs intensively to rid of the liquid and lessen the lumps. As a result, it hurt less and he didn't feel so cold. Now he could take a nap for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then he would jump up of the pain and start running for forty minutes and wave his arms. It did hurt! After that he would doze off on the floor pushing his back against the wall for a quarter of an hour... The feeling of reality was gradually disappearing. His body stiffened. Spivak was slowly turning into an inanimate object, his body was hurting and all he felt was a dull, sharp, dragging pain.

Vladimir had been kept in the cement crypt first for five days, then another week. Then longer... He would fall into oblivion, jump up, run, lose himself... Sometimes he found it difficult to realize whose body was lying just in front of his eyes on the cement floor. He couldn't control his body. His thoughts didn't obey him – they came and went away. When he was beaten up, he felt better. If he felt a sharp pain from an officer's boot he was happy – firstly, the pain would not remain, it would go gradually, secondly, the pain witnessed him being still alive. It meant nothing less than the papers still not signed.

The blood stains on the grey knobbly walls, which he had been watching for many days, were gradually fusing into one whole thing. Like in a cartoon about a magic artist, he could see some faces, objects in them. In his imagination they could talk to each other, bragging their hats or long beards, picking giant buckets full of grapes

from the floor... That one, with rich hair and a long nose like Cyrano de Bergerac's, picked him up, put him across his shoulder and carried him somewhere... Spivak quietly whispered to him, "Leave it..." But the man just waved his sword, laughed and... stayed where he was. "No, that's my school friend Serega in a musketeer's robe and a hat... How did I not recognize him? He's got the same nose... No, not really... But he looks like him. And in the corner there someone is lying flattened... in the robe... the robe is waving in the breeze... and his profile... identical to Yurka Lisochkin! Aramis!" Spivak remembered himself and his friends taking part in a concert for their parents when they were in Year 19...

"Why are you here?" Spivak uttered instinctively... There was no answer. He said loudly, "Why are you here?" He paused and answered to himself, "So, Porthos is still not with them."

Vovka was looking and chatting to them for a long time. He was talking to them as Athos, then as Vovka Spivak. He asked them about their school mates and Alyonka Livanova who had played the role of the queen, and the revolution in Cuba. He thought they answered him. He even argued with them...

"Anyway, where is Porthos?" Spivak thought again. He sniffed the wall and felt it with his fingers. He tried to look at it at different angles... Nothing! He nearly got disappointed in his hopeless search when he noticed a new face right in front of him, with long hair, without a hat or a cloak and a small frame. Not anything like a musketeer. However, there was something peculiar and even familiar in his face. Vladimir tried to ask him questions... There was no answer. The wall seemed to have frowned and kept silence. Then it suddenly began to fall on him... Spivak screamed... There was no shout to be heard. He had lost his voice and he didn't even realize that. He was calling for help...

"This little one... Is he Philya? Petka Philippov," it flashed in his eyes as if he had connected two electric wires. He didn't think it was not Porthos and that little one had been quiet before and had not talked with the other wall's dwellers. Vladimir suddenly felt it was a pay-off. Just in time...

When he was in 7th grade, he, Serega, Yurka and Petka Philippov – "Philya" – found their way into the staff room. They nicked form registers and were about to leave through the window when they were caught by their disabled DT teacher Vasiliych. When the teacher was trying to help Philippov, who was helplessly hanging onto a tree, he fell out of the window and died. Philippov was caught quickly, convicted and sent to Kolpino, into a juvenile prison. He didn't turn state's evidence. Six months later it was reported Petka had died. The Petka who had played a violin in his childhood, had learned to read first in class and recited "Neznaika in the Sunny Town" in front of the class.

"One for all," Petka Philippov's shadow whispered slowly and intensely. Sergey was silent and Yurka stayed where he was, but he uttered, "I didn't push Vasiliych, I did not. He fell out himself..." Spivak was lying in a dirty puddle, wet and aching, and staring at the image of Philya over the piss-hole. He could clearly see Philippov's lips moving, his eyes raising and sparkling...

He didn't know the sparkles came from the dull light bulb, they slipped down the droplets of water on the wall, which were going to fall into a big dirty puddle on the cement floor of the solitary.

Vladimir broke down. When they presented him with the paper form next time, he signed it.

In spite of getting his signature, they didn't let him into the camp. He had to spend another week in the cell full of water, wearing just his pants. After that he was moved into a dry cell, but he didn't get any clothes. Only on his

third week in prison did he get some dirty work clothes. That way the remains of human spirit were knocked out.

"What's the difference?" Spivak asked himself. Should he have signed that damned paper straight away, he wouldn't have suffered the hell of the concrete cell. On the other hand, he wouldn't have come through the hell!

Now he knew what it was. He now knew what hell was and what was a trifle.

Having ticked all the boxes of the psychological tests of the isolation period, Spivak entered the camp at last.

The criminal mode in the camp looked formalized, tough and die-hard. Even though it was an integral component of the cultural community called "the Soviet people", it differed from what that phrase really meant.

In general, the prisoners tried to create what they had lost. Some sort of a society model was taking shape there, the society they were taken out of. Of course, their society didn't invent a bike or a model of laws. It was just coping the relationships which were either respected or disrespected but acknowledged in freedom.

There were exactly six barracks in No. 6. The relationship between them was settled by the Supervisor. If it hadn't been, the barracks would have looked like separate clans and not one whole criminal machine. As a rule, the leader was the most strong-willed and respected prisoner. You could recognize such people straight away. It was the fairest prisoner who had passed true life tests. His word had authority with everyone. It was him who drew a line in the most complicated problems in the camp, whether it was with a godfather or ordinary prisoners. He even dealt with the camp administration. Especially if the staff "found" drugs or prohibited items in the parcels too often.

For instance, a week ago the morning check-up lasted too long. The newcomers, who had recently passed the isolation period, broke the fence and without com-

mand went into the barrack. After that incident, at the meeting it was decided the supervisor would punish the isolation superintendent, who had not taught the newcomers the right things to do, had not found out who was a decent person, who was red or offended, had allowed absolute idiots to go into the camp. What was he given three weeks for? Now he was being questioned. They did punish him but didn't decide who to substitute him with. So the administration could do whatever they wanted in the isolation zone. There was no fair control!

When Spivak found out about that, he understood what the guard in the police van meant. That was it. Shift changes. Going from the isolation zone into the camp didn't mean coming home. It was a loyalty test, its existence laws. As it was Spivak's first sentence, everyone was trying to check how strong he was. Troublemakers started. They would provoke him for an argument, ask him tricky questions and would want conventional answers. One prisoner politely tried to make him wash his clothes, another wanted him to make his bunk-bed, one more asked him to swap places. All this was followed by being beaten up, which was called "registration". It was assumed, however, the beating was light, without leaning on the bunk-bed. The barrack supervisor normally didn't interfere but was always watching that important thing. Because it was easy to kick someone leaning on something, even an idiot could do that. The group leader was not an enemy to himself, even though he was staff. He was meant to explain how harmful smoking and drinking were and how to avoid outrageous behaviour. In fact, he only did paper work for conditional early release, because he loved to do it for money.

This straightforward line of events was gradually turning into the geometrical progression, which was leading Vladimir to the most saint place in the camp – a medical unit. Of course, if he was dying and doing ev-

everything according to the rules, he would be looked after by the quarantine, group and isolation ward supervisors. He was only asked to do their washing and he got wound up and was rude to them. That was not right. He had to preserve an equal mind. Patience was something that Spivak lacked in his life. He was too sensitive and proud. Prison was a place for those who had no facial expression and could sew gloves every day and manage to specify their own pattern, even if it was tiny... Spivak was not like that. His face said everything. These kinds of people wouldn't survive. Other people were consistent and it saved them, as well as being resistant to the dull and monotonous way of life.

Spivak, bruised, with a broken rib and collarbone and missing upper front teeth and his neck cut, was put into the medical unit at last. You had to try really hard to get there. Sometimes a weak prisoner had to swallow some repellent stuff to be taken out from his brigade in the camp, even for a couple of days.

Vovka was lying on a white sheet without moving. But the sheet was gradually becoming reddish brown from his blood stains. It was extremely painful to move, even though he had not been beaten for five hours. He was staring at the ceiling, at the white painted metal mounts and couldn't believe it. He didn't believe the reality. "They want to hang me. On those mounts... That's it! This one wants to hang me," Spivak thought when a nurse came in. He instinctively cringed. The sharp pain stabbed his stomach, then it went in his side and calmed down.

The nurse, a macho in a robe of odd colour, was holding a wet cloth dripping with stinky yellow liquid. He took three tablets out of his pocket and put them on the bedside cabinet, then he put the cloth on Spivak's throat near his collarbone. The sticky liquid flowed all over his body.

"What's this for? It won't help the rib or the collar-bone," Spivak thought when the sharp carbolic smell filled the room. When he realized he could still think straight, he got really happy.

He remembered his childhood, his first stay in a hospital after he got food poisoning from mushrooms. He was then given a little plate with sugar and a lump of butter. He didn't know he would need them for his tea and bread, so he thought that was his breakfast and forced himself to eat them. Unforgettable experience... At that very time his schoolmates were visiting a dentist and waiting for their turn...

Now he would crawl on the floor to see a dentist, as long as there was one. "Where is that one?" Vovka was terrified of the nurse. "He must be waiting somewhere here... Waiting for me to drop off... Where's he?" There was no one around. Spivak was looking around but couldn't see anyone. He was lying motionlessly on his medical bed, alone in the cell.

Vovka Spivak relaxed and tears appeared in his eyes. My god! Is it the price of justice? He had no other thoughts. For the last few months his life had changed so much and now it was breaking his nature, planting new values and motivation, strengthening fresh reflex. No, his intolerance had not disappeared. It was still feeding his behaviour. Only now this feeling was deeply hidden. Even the tears in his eyes didn't fall down his hollow cheeks but stayed where they were. Some new unknown powerful force was resisting the gravity and didn't let them go down.

A moment later the nurse came back. Now he had a man with him. The man was small, crooked, with his grey face all puckered up, he was very ill and had difficulty climbing on his bed. With a moan, he lay down clumsily on his side, his back to Spivak. Two prisoners who helped the nurse with the man, put a bottle with a

label "Stolichnaya Vodka" and two pieces of processed cheese on his bedside cabinet. "Petro Ignatyich, here's some broth for you. It's the chicken broth, no fat," the prisoner babbled. "Tomorrow we'll get you some more. Whatever you need, we'll find it. Maybe, some medicine for your stomach..."

The young supervisor was quietly standing at some distance, looking indifferently at all the fuss.

"Cheers, Boor," the patient said, then he turned to the tall bald man with his arms and neck covered with tattoos and added, "You can go now, I'll be fine. Any problems – come and see me straight away! Don't think I am ill. I will be fine in a couple of days, I know."

The nurse gave him an injection. Everyone disappeared. The man screwed up his face, groaned and calmed down. A moment later he was snoring. Spivak was lying without moving. He didn't look around and he didn't see anyone. He didn't have any thoughts. It was the silent calmness of an alive creature being awake.

Now the medical unit supervisor came in. Everyone knew him. He was the favourite person of all people and times. His nickname was "Stalin". He crinkled his face from the smell of Vovka's cloth, then he examined his neighbour's bed, tucked the blanket and put some ampoules into the bedside cabinet. When leaving, he looked at Spivak, saw his opened eyes, stopped and said, "Watch out, you, wretch! Don't you dare! I can move you to another cell and won't give you aspirin. You've been lucky so far. If something is wrong with him, give us a shout immediately. Understand?"

Vovka sighed deeply twice, as they do in the army line before the treble plangent "Hooray!", he strained his face painfully and quietly, as if he was dying, breathed out, "Yeah..."

He was still lying on his back and didn't have a clue that the snoring man lying next to him could easily change

his life at a glance. For better or for worse. Vovka knew the fundamentals of the prison hierarchy but he couldn't even imagine the man lying next to him was the prison camp supervisor.

That was the head prisoner in the camp. Not a godfather, no! Godfathers feel at home out of prison. In prison he was the main person. He was the most respectable person, that's for sure. Everyone knew about his life in No.6 and was reciting it. Spivak didn't have time to learn anything of his life. When you are being beaten all the time, you don't have a chance to absorb any other information apart from the thoughts of escaping from a blow.

Petro Ignatyich, as other prisoners called him, got into the camp in Chusovaya seven years ago. No one knew what for. Or where from. Had he been in prison before? Had he been moved here from another camp? They didn't know anything. He didn't have the wrong tail following him. The staff didn't gossip about his past. There was enough of his own authority.

Everyone knew that while on the isolation period he had not just been beaten up, they had tried to kill him. Because according to his file he was severely negative, which meant he would not confess anything or betray anyone. He was suffering down to the limit and knew he could go to the extreme measures only as a last resort. So when he could not realize where he was and what was happening to him, and his ears, nose and mouth were bleeding heavily, his intuition suggested that that was the moment. The future leader of No. 6 felt the hidden razor with his tongue, ran to the window and jumped out. He smashed the glass and fell on the ground. All his body was cut through with the shards of glass, but he jumped up and cut the veins on his both hands. The staff of the quarantine didn't care about him but they didn't want to take responsibility for his death. So they stopped his beatings, stitched up his wounds and carried him to the

medical unit on the stretcher. It was in the medical unit that they found out he had a gastric ulcer, which would now and again burst, become infected, inflame and turn into other things incompatible with life in general and especially in the camp in Chusovaya.

But this withy shrunk man survived. He survived in any conditions. His patience and self-consistence founded in his childhood had always saved him and later made other people respect him everywhere, in No. 6, earlier in Nizhniy Tagil and before that in Rostov camp, No. 12, as well as in the juvenile camp outside Leningrad...

In an hour a morning formation was starting. But it had nothing to do with those two. They were quietly lying on their beds. One was lying crooked and sleeping. The other was staring at the ceiling and waiting for something...

The camp supervisor got up early, as he should do. It had become a habit. It didn't matter if he was ill. He gave himself an injection and now he was sitting on the edge of his bed staring at his neighbour and waiting for him to stop moaning in his sleep and to wake up. His neighbour's eyelids flinched and his eyes opened. Spivak sighed deeply and his body trembled of deep dry cough. He tried to get up but a sharp pain passed through his body from his head to his feet.

"You haven't changed at all, Vovka," his neighbour said quietly as if he was talking to himself. Spivak heard him.

"...o you know ...e?" Spivak asked having a trouble pronouncing words.

"Yes, I do. You are easy to recognize, I am telling you. You haven't changed. It happens... when you have an easy life. But you won't recognize me."

Vovka strained himself and trying to overcome a dull pain in his body raised his hands and grabbed the iron pipes connecting the beds. He turned his face towards his neighbour, "...o, I ...on't know ...ou."

"Sure. You've all forgotten me. Shall I recite Cid's monologue in French? Or something from 'Neznaika in the Sunny Town'?"

"...ilya? How's the...?" Spivak didn't recognize him but he understood it was Petka Philippov in front of him. Alive Philya... He didn't look like him though. As if a different person had learned about their school life and was now trying to pass as Philippov. But why?

Philya. Was that the frail clumsy boy with a big white collar over his shirt? Yes, it was. But his face was different. It was grey, covered in scars, one eyelid was drooping and half-covering his left eye. The nose... Petka had a long thin nose. This person had a flat nose with a curved bridge. No, it must be him! The same squint of eyes. Like Lenin's. The main thief of No. 6. The most respectable prisoner in the camp.

"Phi-i-ilya," Vovka didn't say but whispered. Then he got ready and said in French, "Comment ça va?" His mouth now opened showing empty upper gums, his thin reddish-blue lips with splits on them were now moving. First the upper lip, then the right side of the bottom lip and in the end the left part of it shaped something like a smile.

Vovka started crying – second time that day. This time tears were pouring and there was no stopping them.

Cup of Tea

That day didn't start well for Bogdanov. Early in the morning he was woken up by the telephone. It was his former school friend, Alyonka. She was ringing from Vladivostok, he could hardly hear her. He just understood she had got married. The conversation was cut off. After that crazy unexpected phone call his thoughts got confused. "Why did she ring?" Serega thought. "What does it have to do with me? I was her friend, I really liked her eyelashes. I still do. But what does Vladivostok have to do with it?" He knew something had happened but he didn't know what. This thought was bothering him. What made it even worse was that he was annoyed and dissatisfied with himself after the stupid calls to all district organizations.

At ten all the staff were called into the assembly room. Without any introduction, the assistant secretary began to announce addresses for visits. "What visits? Don't we have enough letters to answer? Every single one of us has about twenty of them. They are all urgent and need attendance," head of the industrial department whispered loudly enough to be heard. He was worried about the report at the plenary meeting and couldn't imagine all of his instructors and his assistant going somewhere today.

Two days a week they all turned up for work at twelve. Each of them was supervising the building of two nine-storey blocks of flats in a new district. In autumn they would wear wellington boots, with their trousers

turned up and carrying their clean boots over their shoulders. Their job was to supervise engineers and technicians collecting the carrot crop in their sponsored farms. In spring they would watch them break the ice in the roads and pavements just before the first secretary of the region party committee turned up.

The assistant secretary was stating the task with his monotonous voice. It was about who needed to go where to carry the information to the people. He was punctually crossing off his table sheet what he had just said.

They had to go to fifteen flats in their district to inform the people about their relatives' death. A plane had had a crash outside Leningrad at night. They couldn't announce it on TV. Then it would have been a published event. So the men had to deliver the news.

It happens all the time. If something doesn't fit standard, something unexpected happens, the district committee is to blame. It means they didn't take everything into account. Ready, set, go!

At the first address where Bogdanov came no one was in. He thought he was lucky and he went to the next address. When he rang the bell, a short middle-aged man opened the door. It was only midday but the man was already tipsy. Bogdanov could hear voices from the flat. Several people were sitting at the table having a drink. It was some sort of celebration, they had more bottles than plates on the table.

Sergey called the man, who opened the door, into the kitchen. In there two women were cooking something. Bogdanov could hear someone's voice, "Where have you gone? Come here! Who is that? It must be the new dad. At last!" But the man could see it was not the new dad.

"What do you want, lad?"

"I am from the district party committee..."

"So? You want to have a drink with us?"

"Hang on. I was sent to you..."

"It's not election time, is it?"

"Does Pyotr Vasilyich Lozhkin live here? I mean, he died today."

The man fell silent. In his head one event was overlapping the other. Celebration and the arrival of that one...

"What are you talking about? What the hell... Where is Petka?"

"His plane had a crash this morning outside Leningrad." Trying to prove he was telling the truth, Bogdanov poked his party committee ticket into his face. "I told you, I am from the district party committee."

Sergey suddenly thought, "So, if I am from the district committee, they should believe in the death of their relative, but if it was from the Council of the people's deputies they wouldn't believe, not in a million years. No, I think any certificate will work here. This is how it works. If something happens, they ring an attendant on duty in the district committee."

"Hang on! Who do you think you are to tell us this?" the relative shouted. "Katya, Lena, come here! Quick! The two young women came up to them and Bogdanov had to repeat everything again. Only now three pairs of eyes were staring at him.

"Here's the phone number you can call. They will answer your questions. Now, excuse me, I've got to go," Sergey mumbled.

The instructor saw his listeners eye lose their joy, then puzzlement. They became scared, faithless and aggressive. The bloke walked around Sergey and blocked the front door.

"No, wait a second! I don't get it... What's happening now? You've got to tell us what, why, where we've got to go. You tell THEM," the man pointed at the people sitting at the table. They must have been the parents and young wife of the dead. "I don't need your card. Do you think you can do it just because you're wearing a tie? You came here, dumped a load and now you're going to run!"

The man was pushing Bogdanov inside the room with his belly, then snatched his card from him and threw it on the bed. "Klava, look what they are doing! Just look!" the man shouted and pointed at the party card lying on the pillow. "Going around and destroying people's lives."

"Shut up," the elderly man said quietly and with menace in his voice. He must have been the father of the dead. "Klava, calm him down." He lifted himself up, got the card from the bed and headed for Bogdanov. He stopped in front of him and looked at his face without blinking. The old man's eyes were getting more and more narrow and his low lip was slowly pushing itself against the upper lip. Occasionally he would turn his head to look at the elderly woman, who must have been his wife. She was making a fuss trying to get up and she dropped a couple of bottles on the floor. Next to her stood Klava. She was howling and screaming.

"Uncle Vasya! Uncle Vasya! Don't listen to him! They are swines!" she started howling again and waving her fists as if fighting evil spirits. "Auntie Klava, don't listen to him. They are scum bags..." she didn't even look at Bogdanov but was still waving her arms.

The old man was holding the lapel of his blazer covered with a stock with medals and orders with his left hand and he was holding Bogdanov's card with his right hand.

"He is going to hit me now. With the card. It was better to get a blow than to watch them..." Bogdanov was thinking who he looked like at the moment, he just shrank into himself instinctively.

"Go away, lad," the old man said sharply. He pointed at the door. "You don't even understand how much damage you've done. You just came here and..." The man shook his head and waved his hand strongly. "Just go. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know. I don't even understand how people can do it... This is not the way to do it!"

Sergey turned to the front door. There was no sense in saying anything. "Damn!" he remembered about his card. At that very moment the first man kicked him out of the flat. "Go away, scum bag in a tie! We'll find out everything without your help. They will show it on the box. It might be all wrong. Sending the scum bags - it's out of order!"

Sergey ran down the stairs from the fourth floor and stood downstairs, shaken up. This job looked like a hangman's. People look at you like you are a hangman. Of course, they do. There was a person and you come and say he has died. It looks like you are to blame. Like a postman in the wartime, when he would deliver a death notice. At least a postman had a letter, he had nothing, just words. Those days everyone had the same grief and many saw others being brought dreadful news. Why is it the district party committee? Why not deputies? They had been elected so they were known at least. It was easier with Afghanistan. People from the military commissariat dealt with that. They were the ones to draft, they are the ones to return. But here... It looks like it is the party's fault if the party members visit families and tell them the dreadful news. How can he get his card back? He will be in trouble without it!

The window on the fourth floor opened and his card fell on the snow right in front of Sergey.

At the last address there was an old woman, the mother of the dead. As soon as she saw Bogdanov in the doorway, crumpling his hat and going to say something, the woman froze on the spot and a few seconds later she started crying quietly.

"I knew, I felt something happen. I couldn't sleep all night. What's the matter with Igoryok? Where is he? Something wrong with the plane?"

Sergey was silent, he lowered his head and thought it was silly to say he was from the party committee. His

unexpected visit coincided with what the woman had dreamed of last night. She didn't need anything else. The woman was standing at the doorway and crying. Her next door neighbour peeped out of his door. He was a middle-aged man with long red hair. He looked around, watched the crying woman, then Bogdanov and shut his door.

"He is going to call the militia," Sergey thought, and he had no document of the catastrophe. They could say he was frightening people. The militia men liked to arrest people with cards and certificates, especially if someone was waving with them.

Suddenly the woman turned around and went into a room. She took a black knitted scarf and covered the mirror in the hallway with it. She looked around indifferently at the self-made radio on the window sill, the photo of her son and daughter-in-law on the chest of drawers. She came back and took the scarf from the mirror. Then she sat on the chair and without a word took the kettle, filled two cups with hot water, moved a little glass bowl with three chocolate bars into the middle of the table and said quietly, "Sit with me".

Sergey took his hat off, sat on the edge of the chair and drank the boiling water which burnt his lips. He didn't dare raise his eyes or even think it was not tea they were drinking, just hot water. They had been sitting like this for half an hour. The militia did not turn up.

"Do you know for sure what happened to Igoryok? Did you see it? He might be alright after all," the woman said quickly. She didn't expect him to answer, she was just sobbing and from time to time touched her eyes with a white handkerchief.

The woman told him that in the early thirties her husband, an engineer, was arrested, and she survived on her own during the siege of Leningrad and after the war, in the fifties, she adopted a boy from an orphanage...

"This is it, isn't it?"

Sergey closed his eyes and nodded.

After such visits Bogdanov didn't feel like thinking about factories developing, party work perfection or executing the decisions of the Central Committee plenum. By the evening everybody had returned to the district committee. No one asked them how they felt or how the people they had visited felt. No one needed reports about the work done. They knew one of the instructors of the Organizing Committee was taken into hospital; the relatives of the dead were alright, but she was not. Another instructor was nearly arrested but he managed to cope.

The work day continued.

An elderly woman with grey smooth hair, in thin-framed glasses and a small brief-case on her lap had been sitting on a chair in the corridor of the district party committee. She was a professor, a doctor of science and a party member. She was waiting for the person in charge for her speech at the plenum. Bogdanov had a PhD in geography, so he was in charge of all scientists' speeches.

Sergey hastily opened the door, greeted the woman and apologized for being late. He let her come in and sit down. He took her typewritten speech. For her it was a usual procedure, it was always better if someone from the district committee would look through her speech, it was safer. "I have mentioned Brezhnev in the beginning, named all his posts," the professor said.

"Oh, yes, thank you," Bogdanov mumbled, realizing how silly it was to thank her. He saw Brezhnev being mentioned only once and he tensed up. His name needed to be mentioned twice. At the beginning and at the end of the speech. The regalia could be mentioned once. Still...

Sergey knew the most skilful experts in the town committee managed to mention Brezhnev three times in a five-minute speech. They did it so cleverly, no one even noticed it. That's how good the text was. They

didn't just say, "As the General Secretary, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev said..." followed by what he said. No, they did it skilfully and elegantly. First they would say what was needed, then "This is how the party and its general secretary teach us..." It sounded soft and subtle, as if those were not his words. The rest of the speech usually didn't interest anyone.

"That's a big error," Sergey thought, "I won't be able to get away with it later."

The assistant manager was sitting at his table and looking at the known scientist. She was talking about science, her institute, her speech... He could hardly hear her. His head was full of today's visits to people's homes, all that nonsense of the staff and ideological subterfuges. And why did Alyonka ring? He had spent all the reserves of his mind to struggle with negative emotions. His feelings were beginning to come out, he was finding it difficult to hold them inside.

To tell the elderly woman the rules of behaviour at the plenum, all the tricks and dodgy games of "organizers" and "ideologists" was absurd and shameful. Especially when she looked like the woman he had recently been sitting and silently drinking "tea" with.

Documentation Management Manual

After having worked for three years, Bogdanov became aware that everything around him in the staff community was his unfriendly environment and the people around him were almost his enemies. Not a single person would come and say, "Serega, here's the text for your report," or "Take new figures on the factories, mate"... No one would rush to run messages with him, even if their name was in the list of providers. Everyone would soon realize that the person responsible for any problem would be the one whose name was first on the list, the rest of them were there just for convenience.

He could expect only the worst from everyone. He expected another letter from a caller, another complaint from neighbours, competition from his colleague, a lot of work from his boss, loads of mistakes from the secretary of the party organization and a letter from the district KGB about him preventing counter intelligence measures from the company directors.

So the first things formed in Bogdanov's mind were subtle senses of danger and ability to feel it by the slightest shades of people's behaviour, their mimics, smells and sounds, everything that could move and change. And the main thing was not to interfere and cross the street the other way.

"Don't stand out!" Sokolov, the head of department, would shout at the slow-witted newcomers. "Don't ever stick out! If you make a mistake, you've got to become "transparent" immediately! Otherwise it's being "impudent". Well, who are you?" the boss would ask, imitating Chapayev. "You are not a communist leader, just an instructor. You have no power. You cannot order or decide anything. You can only advise or control. Advise and control, nothing else. But do you know what the amusing thing is? What the mystery and joy of our existence are? The mystery is that this very power is born out of nothing as soon as your paper is signed by someone who has this power. This is the moment of truth! And another question is whether you will be able to keep your human qualities when you are in this environment or not."

To be able to understand that, it took people different amounts of time. Some were taking their time, some were quick. Retardation was compensated quickly – the person was fired quickly, like a cork out of a bottle of champagne. The responsible people from the Organizing department would hold it with their hands to reduce the sound of it, they didn't want their personnel mistakes to be identified. But the unpleasant and muffled pop would remain in the memory of those who were nearby.

Who, when and what will become? It is known almost immediately. Not to everyone, only to the authorities. It depends on the set of personal qualities, biography and lack of records. Take Sokolov, for instance. He could have become the member of the Political Bureau. But he is wearing the wrong shirts.

"Clearness is worth everything," the boss used to say because nearly everyone always wanted to know everything about everyone, especially about yourself. "At the moment you shouldn't know anything about it!" Sokolov used to say, finalizing the subject about the future. "Apart from the fact that you shouldn't know anything!" He

liked to quote Weiss – Belov from the film “The Shield and The Sword”.

Not to have screw ups, you shouldn’t fuss but should fulfil an assignment, just what was requested, at any post. You get a new post only to realize the idea of “distribution”. Wherever the “distribution” took place, it was important to become “isotropic”, which meant being versatile and quick to learn. Then you could be built in the complicated configuration of the next level of the hierarchy line.

In each step of your growth there are ever present ideological and organizational departments. They record and analyse your actions and mistakes, display anything unusual and strange. Their job doesn’t look difficult, but how can you guess, for instance, how wide a black mourning ribbon on a crystal chandelier should be, or how small the white letters on a red billboard sized one by three metres can be. What if the billboard is two by eight metres? A narrow ribbon shows disrespect towards an eminent figure. Even if he is not outstanding, but just eminent. It doesn’t matter! Letters which are too small are a nightmare. They mean disrespect because no one would be able to read them, they mean indirect acknowledgement of the communist party leadership lack, they also mean detraction of the latest Plenary session decrees.

Later Bogdanov would understand that all this seemliness worked only in the centre. How it worked in provinces, he had not seen or even guessed yet.

In the gigantic live system called State its own game was being played. An outstanding figure had left, a new one, being just eminent, had appeared.

The new one started with the discipline, particularly with the party enrolment into the KGB. As it happened ages ago, after Lenin’s death, communists from towns, from factories were sent to the countryside. Now it was happening again.

They sent a job quota to district committees. They were taking Bogdanov. Firstly, because he was an assistant manager. It was more difficult to find someone from another level, they would have to look for a post in apparatus relevant to the job list. Secondly, he had an MPhil, and his first speciality was connected to nuclear science and radiochemistry. What was more, he knew a foreign language.

But as it always happens, there is always a weak point in security ministries, when one little thing can change everything.

"Do you agree to come and work for us?" a chubby man in uniform with shoulder boards asked Bogdanov.

"Yes! Of course! It's a great honour and... trust."

"Do you realize it's a different type of work and you'll have to learn?"

"Yes, I understand. I am ready!"

"How is your health?"

"Yes!.. I mean, it's fine..."

The general lifted his eyes at last and looked closely at the member of the district committee, then at the Captain who was standing next to him and said, "Show him the way to our doctors."

One of Serega's eyes was a little bit weaker than the other. Just a bit, half a dioptre. But it must have been the eye he needed to aim. That was it! All the plans for jobs and posts cracked. They had to send a request to Moscow asking if they could break the instruction on the eyes of their future agents.

While they were sending a request and waiting for the answer, life couldn't wait. Bogdanov was sent on a duty journey.

To Afghanistan. As a Counsellor party assistant.

It was a three-month trip. Three weeks training in Moscow and two months in Afghanistan. In Kabul the authority was not too soft. The mushaver-advisers held

an interview with him, instructed him, explained the safety rules. In the Central Committee of the People's Democratic party of Afghanistan, Sergey was introduced to his boss, a former first secretary of a Moscow district committee and shown the documents. He was handed a "kalashnikov", a "makarov", loads of propaganda literature in Russian. And, of course, they set high-priority tasks...

Then they put him, his boss and his luggage into an air stream propeller and two or three hours later they were in a local airport thirty kilometres from Kandahar. In the outskirts of that town they were supposed to spend two whole months in one of the houses.

Mujahidins were hardly at war there, they just wasted American money. In the day they would work in the fields, raising the earth around poppy flowers, and at night they would start shooting. Sometimes they would shoot in the day, but not spitefully, without aiming to kill everyone, otherwise they wouldn't get their wages.

The counsellor and his assistant were lucky. Where they lived, they could only stop a bullet or get a shell through the window from "their friends" - extreme radical representatives of another group of the People's Democratic party - "Halk" (Pashtuns). That happened every time when the local committee made the wrong decision. In the committee most people were from another group - "Parcham".

Sergey and his boss lived in a small plain stone house with only one room, one exit and two windows. That was the counsellor's decision. "The key is not to live in a hotel. We don't want to be quickly found by everyone who wants or doesn't want us." The house door was nailed up and covered with sand sacks from the inside. The windows were sheltered with iron sheets. Only one window could open. The counsellor would burn some documents on the floor once a week. While he was doing this, they

would carefully open the window. The stale rotten smell would be mixed with the hot air bursting from the outside. Bogdanov then would look through the crack in the door if anyone could see the plume of smoke from under the roof of their plain house.

The window was also used for the counsellor to come out, straight into an armoured car coming to grips with the window. Bogdanov would stay inside to type his documents on the typewriter "Aurika" and to draw a nonsense. They had a small supply of paper. The counsellor would renew it every day. The paper sheets were very thin, nearly transparent, and they also had a lot of carbon paper. He could make five or six copies at a time. He had never wasted so much paper in all his life. For Sergey it meant only one thing – his papers were meant to make other people live a new way.

Not far away there were extremely challenging areas. There were cases of heroism, how could you do without it? The most difficult thing for Bogdanov and his boss was daily life. The toilet was inside the house – it was a hole in the floor. There was no escape from the heat or the smell. The counsellor had a chance of getting into big rooms with air-conditioning, but in the house it was impossible to live. They hardly had any clean water. Just enough to drink. The water for a wash was different, the colour of khaki. They also had lice and fleas... Drinking vodka didn't help on the inside or outside.

The new life in a new place for Sergey started when he was told, "Don't go outside. You don't need that!" He needed to work for a few months here and help the counsellor to prepare his presentations and speeches for the local leader of the party, to fill in the forms, to draw the structure of the party organization in the local centre, to write instructions and to send reports back to Russia. He was only allowed to communicate with the interpreter, the party organization leader and his assistant.

It was better not to meet any Soviet army officers. They didn't like counsellors and they didn't really distinguish between military and political counsellors.

Late in the evening the counsellor would return home and enter the house the same way – through the window. He would bring food, paper and drinking water. They were the main things. They would look through the documents Bogdanov had prepared. The counsellor would put them into his iron briefcase. Then they would have dinner. Before he went to bed, gradually trying to relax, his boss would be telling Sergey about the tricks of their work.

As far as Bogdanov understood from their night conversations, the problem was that there was not really a communist party in Afghanistan. It had never really existed. After it had been founded in the sixties, it was split up into two, except that neither of the groups managed to build up the foundation among the Muslim population.

"When our troops entered here, there appeared a lot of different counsellors," the former district committee secretary told him. "And recently specialists in party building have been coming to Kabul, kind of helping to make the party."

"Our first secretary was transferred to Uzbekistan. We thought, he would take all his staff with him, but he just took the judge, prosecutor and military commissar."

"It is hard there as well. It will last long and there is a risk of being killed," the counsellor answered and continued, "Well, at least there you have your own people. In here they have never even had any regulations. Some party! No rules, no instructions, no principles. By the way, don't forget to give me the documentation management manual before I go tomorrow."

"Of course, I will do it!" Sergey understood the polite order to work all night.

"All I know," the counsellor went on, "is that we can't establish power in here. We might do in the cen-

tre. But in the provinces there is a mess," the counsellor shook his head and mumbled something. Sergey thought he heard him swear.

The tired and wound up district committee secretary was telling Bogdanov about all pain points he had come across while he was here, on the other side of the Amu-Darya. He was really frank with Sergey. His everyday dangers must have made him less cautious, unlike all the politicians from his country. After the counsellor dropped off, Bogdanov was thinking a lot about his words before he started working on his manual.

Behind the house wall there was a sound of the thud of hoofs and dim voices in the pushtu. Sergey immediately covered the stool and the oil lamp on it with a cloth. He jumped up and rushed to the window. He moved the iron sheet away a bit and looked outside through the little crack. It was dark, but by the loud breath of the horses and a clank of weapons he understood there were mujahidins a hundred metres from their house, about forty of them. They were near a hotel where local party organization heads, a few military counsellors and guests from the capital lived. Bogdanov could see bright shot flashes and later he heard gun shots. The counsellor was already standing next to him. As soon as he heard the shots he woke up and took his place by the window, near Sergey. Here they kept two guns and four shells.

"Well, have you written the manual?" the boss asked unexpectedly watching the people through the crack in the window. The mujahidins were still shooting the hotel windows but didn't dare go inside.

"What manual?"

"The documentation management manual..."

The counsellor laughed and started searching for his iron briefcase on the floor. At last he found it, opened it and took out a space communications telephone and an aerial.

"Is that the Consulate? Duty operator? This is number fifteen. We've got an attack on the hotel here... We are fine... Yes... No, they didn't... Waiting." The counsellor folded up the telephone and left it near the briefcase.

"That's why it is iron," Sergey grasped, "I thought it was for my papers not to burn..." They were lying on the floor and waiting. They were completely wet. Wet from the heat or fear. Even though Bogdanov had been psychologically preparing himself for similar situations, he didn't take them seriously.

He just couldn't believe it was happening in real life. To him! He had not left the house, as he was ordered, had not shot anyone and he had only seen the war in films.

They were lying with their heads on the guns and waiting for what was going to happen. There could be a fight or the mujahidins could fire for a while and leave. They were waiting for their people and tried not to think they could be spotted or their "fortress" could be already known. The mujahidins could just finish with the hotel and move over to them... What is two guns against the pack of armed and gowned warriors?

But the fight started. The firing increased. The left part of the hotel was already burning. The lodgers of the hotel were jumping out of the windows. The people were running in different directions, about five of them fell and didn't get up.

The mujahidins began shooting from a machine-gun. They must have enjoyed it. To the left of the wall of a nearby house lit up by the fire, Bogdanov could see two shadows pass. Two people were running towards their house bending low and not shooting. A shell flash illuminated them.

Bogdanov thought they were Russians, without hats and wearing the same dark jackets. "Why are the jackets the same?" Sergey thought. He concentrated on those two coming nearer.

Without asking his boss, Bogdanov moved away the iron sheet from the window and shouted into the darkness, "Come here! Quick!

"Don't even think of shooting," said the counsellor and put his hand on Serega's gun. A second later the two people found themselves inside their hiding-place.

"It stinks in here!" these were the first words Bogdanov and his boss heard in Russian, and then, "Who are you?"

"And who are you?" the counsellor asked.

"We are from the hotel," said one of the visitors pompously, he was taller than the other one and had a moustache. He seemed to be in charge. As soon as he came inside, he lay on the ground to the left from the window, ran an eye over the humble habitation, saw packs of paper on the crooked table, a typewriter and now he was staring at the hosts of their accidental hiding-place. He didn't have any weapons, neither did the second man.

"You must be political people," the man in charge summed up. "I always feel the dear party breathe behind my back." Then he remembered something important and sharply turned his head towards his mate, "Sanya, keep looking. They should give it a rest soon."

The one who was called Sanya was lying on the other side of the window, next to Bogdanov. He was looking at the square in front of the hotel anyway and he let his boss do the talking with the hosts.

The boss saw the communication device and reached out to get it...

"Come off it, comrade!" the counsellor uttered at last.

"I've got to inform," the man with a moustache made an excuse.

Without saying a word, Bogdanov was exchanging glances with the counsellor and thinking to himself, "In terms of habits, impudent behaviour and confidence they look like military men. They probably didn't have time

to put their uniform on... But they did put their suits on... They don't belong to us, that's for sure. The counsellor would have known them. Fancy that – they have no weapons... Maybe, they are secret agents from the station. Or visiting. All the same – KGB men."

It didn't take them long to figure out each other. Experience. And a burning sense of danger. Unlike anything else, it pushes the idea along all the curves of the brain and gives the result.

"We have already informed them. Waiting," Bogdanov butted in. He got up and made a move towards the impudent visitor. The counsellor decided to put the telephone into the briefcase. The partner of the man with a moustache, having listened to their conversation and staring through the crack in the window, understood they were their friends.

The only thing that he couldn't understand was why it smelt of crap and rot in that accidental fortress, and he was wrinkling his nose and twisting his head as if he were trying to look away...

After five minutes, even though it felt like at least half an hour had passed, the fight behind the iron sheet had died away. Through the crack, they could see the mujahidins leaving and going away.

They had done what they needed to do, they had earned their money and they had worked with a good result. Now they could relax.

The man near the window turned to the oil lamp, stretched and even yawned. He was probably nervous. The dim lamp covered with a cloth beamed at Sergey, approaching the main visitor.

"Hang on a second. Let me guess," the man with a moustache fixed his eyes on Bogdanov and was watching him closely now. The sides of his moustache raised up and his immaculate white teeth shone in the dark room.

"You are Serega, for instance... I even know your surname..."

"Lisa! You idiot!" now Sergey remembered where he had seen that moustache. Not on Hussein, surely!

"Why idiot?"

"Because you hang about where you shouldn't."

"On the contrary! Where I should! Hang on a minute. How do you say it? If people are walking along the highway and not lurking paths..."

"...they will definitely meet... Hey, you!" Serega said and they embraced each other. Then they laughed quietly and in a moment suddenly whistled the famous tune from the film "Volunteers".

"Ok, friends," the counsellor suddenly remembered he was the first secretary of the district party committee, and not just a serviceman or a chief of the KGB district administration. "As far as I understand, they have finished it outside. So you can have five minutes for a chat and then we go our different ways." He got up and authoritatively picked up the gun. "We haven't seen you, you haven't seen us. We've got our instructions. And yours... They are even worse... The help will arrive any time now... We'll be in trouble."

Lisochkin looked at the counsellor with understanding, then turned to his friend Sanya, raised his forefinger and shook it with a smile. Something like, the party is always right. It's true!

Yurka and Serega were squatting like Afghans and were taking a trip down memory lane without seeing anything. They were talking at the same time but were able to hear and understand each other. Second nature. They remembered everyone, quickly, without emotions, as if they were doing a job. It took them exactly five minutes.

Five minutes later the unexpected visitors got up, said goodbye reservedly and shook the hosts' hands.

Sashka moved the iron sheet and they both disappeared into the dark.

"Well, isn't my first secretary clever? Brainy! He didn't listen to anyone and was always saying in Kabul we wouldn't live in a hotel, we would live separately, in an old abandoned house, even in the rubbish skip."

"Why did you mention the manual?" thought Sergey suddenly when he was praising his boss in his mind.

"Well, just in case... It is our dear party weapon of war. They've done so much with the paper. They thought of doing things quicker, but they forgot the main thing – when you put preparations and control together, then you can expect small interruptions first, then corruption and a crisis in the end. What can you do? Since the twenties everything has been turned upside down in the party code." The counsellor could be talking of that for ages but he stopped, pointed at the window and asked, "Did you go to school with him? He is quite impudent."

"The same playground. The same form," Bogdanov answered. "But our destinies..." he remembered what Yurka had just told him about Vovka Spivak and shut his mouth.

Help didn't come that night. The hotel burned. The local police picked up the bodies. In the morning the servicemen from the station came in a Jeep. Two people got out of the car, had a look around, didn't say anything and left. In the place where the hotel used to be, the local children were hanging around for a long time.

An Orange Sea

The summer was coming to an end in Abkhasia. Hydrangea blossomed early in 1992. The rich light green buds invisibly transformed and became completely white. Nearby they looked like lumps of snow and reminded of the winter Leningrad. In autumn the flower heads would turn pink and three-meter bush branches would bend down to the ground under their weight. No one here knew the scientific name of them but their smell of vanilla or jasmine would be remembered. Luxurious white caps of fanciful petals on long strong stems were growing into the open window making everyone breathe in the wonderful aroma. The smell got even stronger with the morning chill coming down from the mountains and pushing out the velvet and warm sea air. A delicate grayish white two-headed Sukhumi mountain could be seen from the window of a small room on the first floor of a wooden and unplastered house. A blue lane of the stone road with multicoloured spots of slowly and silently moving cars was stretching to the mountain top turning around the foot covered with cedars. On the left, behind the various roofs, there was a narrow strip of the sky-blue sea, restricted by the skyline. The white sky was being filled by the gentle morning sun. Its rays flashed from behind the mountain and got into the untidy room. First it shone on the curved Viennese chair back and carelessly left clothes on it, then it noticed a young woman lying in bed and stopped on her face. Her sensitive eye lashes flinched.

"Lenushka, are you awake?" the blue-eyed lieutenant in a naval uniform asked, gently stroking her fair hair. The eyelashes on her careless sleepy face flinched again.

"Aha, you are awake!" the lieutenant answered to himself with a smile.

He was sitting on the side of the iron bed and touching his wife's face in the places where the sun rays had just been shining, to stop the sun tickling her. Then he would bend over and gently kiss her. He put his hand on her bump under the cover and softly stroked it.

"Pity you can't eat citrus at the moment. The locals brought two barges of tangerines to our pier. They are not fully ripe yet, but so tasty! We eat them for lunch."

"Igoryok, why are you wearing a uniform?" Lena whispered under her breath stretching herself. "What's the occasion?"

"There isn't one! Last night Georgian landing troops turned up in Gagra. Would you imagine, they've got St. Andrew's flag! They got the ships last year after the separation and haven't changed anything. Or maybe on purpose... They've got a former Political Bureau member now. He might still be thinking he is a Foreign affairs minister. And this uniform is just in case."

"What case?"

"Nothing. Don't worry. I'll come back soon and in the evening we'll go motor-boating. The captain promised, do you remember Alexey? He popped in last week," the lieutenant quickly got up, rolled the imaginary steering-wheel and sang, "An orange sky, an orange sea, tra-la-la, tra-la-a..."

Igor left without having breakfast and Lena stayed in bed thinking about their evening boat ride.

Elena and Igor got married a year ago. Straight after he got a dirk and the stars of the medical lieutenant, he was sent to Georgia for testing a new medical preparation in the field environment. For the time being he was en-

rolled in the Russian border unit which was still defending the sea border of the former USSR. Lena went with her husband.

They stayed in a room of a two-storey private house. A straight road led from the house to the sea, it had been planted with slender rows of date palms, Chinese palm trees and gentle oleanders and was called Leon avenue. Recently it had been named Lenin Avenue. Two kilometres from the house there was a military pier with a lot of Russian boats, barges and tug-boats. That was where Igor had been going every morning for two months.

Lena had to buy something for the dinner so she went to Sukhumi's central market. She had to wait for a bus for a long time but it didn't come, so she decided to walk to Mir Avenue and then she turned left and walked another thirty minutes to Karl Marx Street. After walking past two or three quarters of the buildings she saw a nervous man running towards her. He said the public transport was not working and there had been a bomb explosion at the market, there had been victims and casualties. While they were talking, something had changed around them. Kindergarten children ran past them followed by frightened women with bags and sacks.

Lena stopped. She decided not to go to the market but to turn back, to the house. The way back was long and weary. She had to walk around the new anti-tank barriers. She could see militiamen with guns. Near her house in the Lenin Park, she could see armed people.

That day armed troops of the Georgian army entered Sukhumi but were stopped at the Red Bridge by the Abkhazian militiamen. That was near the piers of the sea port. Georgian helicopters appeared in the sky and a moment later went away after firing a military sanatorium and the building of the Supreme Soviet. Radio, television and telephone didn't work. There was no light. Dreadful rumours were spreading all over the town – Georgians

let all the criminals out of the prison and they were robbing, raping and murdering in town.

An eighty-year-old heavy man, the owner of the house where the young family stayed, tried to calm Elena down, promised to help her go to Sochi. It was no good looking for Igor. The old man advised not to go to the trade port where the holidaymakers were getting ready for evacuation, there could be a real babel there. Being heavily pregnant, she couldn't go there. It was not far to go to the navel base where her husband was serving, but all the Russian boats had left for Gagra in the morning.

All that reasoning was interrupted by the shouts outside the house and the shriek of the shot dog. People with guns broke into the house. They knocked down the old man and tied down two young women – the man's niece and Elena.

A pacey short man in a tacky jacket and black jeans with round shifty eyes – he must have been the youngest – had already finished with the old man's niece and now started ripping the clothes off Elena. She was lying on the floor and trying to resist. No one could help the young pervert. Everyone was busy. They were emptying the drawers, quickly throwing the contents into a big white sheet spread on the floor. The ironed underwear and clothes, crockery and everything turned up by chance was thrown there.

"Sir!" the young guy was annoyed, "What shall we do with this bitch?" He turned to his boss with shoulder loops of senior lieutenant of Georgian guard and spoke Russian so that she could hear. "Look at her belly! What shall I do? Shoot her?"

The boss was running the show downstairs. He carefully examined the tied sacks that his people were throwing from upstairs and from time to time he would glance angrily at the old man sitting on the chair in the corner of the room.

"Don't bother, bring them all here and go and find someone else. I've got to teach you everything, puppy!"

The small "guard" pulled the women downstairs by their hair. He threw them in the corner where there were fresh seedlings of vine and kicked both of them with his boot. He spat vexedly, he was disappointed he hadn't got a chance to have enough fun between the fire-fights. Then he suddenly stood up over the women and relieved himself laughing.

At the same time the other men took the old man into the yard and started asking him about the Abkhazians' weapons. They demanded three million from him, then one million, half an hour later – three million again. They beat him up and shot in the air. The old man fell unconscious. They took him inside, pulled him into the same room on the ground floor where his niece and Lena were lying on the floor. The Georgians found an iron, undressed the old man and started torturing him. They had been bullying him until the morning came and were pathologically enjoying it. They still didn't get the desired money.

In the morning another group came, they were criminals. They also beat the old man up and demanded a million. When they saw the alive women, they were very surprised. They turned them faces up. The tortured eyes covered in dirt and blood were looking at them. Bruises and ripped dresses with a strong smell of urine cooled down the wishes of the drunk rapists. They dragged the owner of the house outside, put handcuffs on him, hung him on the thick tree branch and beat him up, this time without asking for anything. Then they stopped, slaughtered the chickens and shot morphine.

While they were torturing the old man outside, Lena, lying on her front, managed to untie her hands and the other woman's. They got upstairs together. Through the window of her room Lena climbed down, practically

jumped on the ground, into the white buds of hydrangea bushes. The old man's niece followed her. They decided to find their way to the military pier.

The town had changed a lot in the last twenty four hours. All day it had been fired from the Georgian helicopters. Everywhere houses' ruins were burning, along the prospects burning trees looked like bright torches. Near the park there was a truck with a canvas cover. It was full of corpses, which looked like beef carcasses delivered to a shop. They covered the carriage of the truck mixed with clothes, sandals, hats, socks and dresses.

Slowly, with a big effort making their way between the ruined houses, the women peeped into one of the yards and a second later ran out of there. They saw a big hole in the ground. Out of there women were crying and shouting, dug in the hole up to their shoulders. They were holding children in their raised arms. Around them there walked armed people, shouting something all the time. It was difficult to understand whether they were Abkhazians or Georgians... They could have been someone else who came to help Abkhazians and torture local Georgian people. It was a mutual slaughter.

The two women were making their way along the road in the end of which there was a small wine shop. Its Georgian owner used to always open it for all comers. Now all the windows in his house were smashed, broken bottles were lying around and among the scattered toys – trains, rubber rockets, multicoloured cars – his wife's body was lying in a big puddle of blood. The shop door was facing Rustaveli Embankment and the old Georgian man was nailed to the door.

They had another hundred steps to the pier. They could see no Russian boats. There was a small boat, spinning and pulling tow-ropes of the only barge near the pier. The first barge, full of refugees, had already sailed away five minutes before. It was being slowly dragged by

a tracker. On the pier there gathered about forty women, children and old people. The second barge could be their only rescue. The hospital ship "Yenisei", guided from Sebastopol to evacuate refugees, had just appeared and was approaching the harbour. However, a few Georgian motor-boats were already darting in and out between the ship and the coast. Two tanks were coming to the pier along the prospect and rollicking "guards" of the Georgian army were wandering towards the harbour...

Trying to save themselves, people were jumping into the barge hold. On the tangerines. Like on a soft mattress. Lena looked around – her fellow traveller had disappeared. She could already be on the barge or she could have changed her mind and returned home, to the old man.

Lena climbed aboard across two narrow boards and tried to climb down the hold but lost balance and fell on the other people. They picked up the pregnant woman carefully and carried her into a safe place. The refugees on the ship were looking at each other with anxiety and joy at the same time. Now, very soon they would be taken out of that hell...

Here, in the hold of the old rusty barge, it smelt of tangerines and nothing reminded the people of the war apart from the bullet shells in the hands of the children who were showing off their trophies in front of each other.

As soon as the tug-boat pulled the barge away from the pier, a military helicopter flew past and the firing of the town resumed again. The tanks turned towards the trading port, where the "Yenisei" was accosting, a military motor-boat was approaching the barges and a small cannon turned up on the shore. Georgians were turning it towards the sea to shoot at the barges. The first one, being at a longer distance from the pier, was a good target. The second barge was just leaving the harbour. Its tug-boat turned the horn on and its irregular loud tone sounded like a helpless wounded creature, it blacked out helicop-

ters' roar, tanks' caterpillar tracks rumble and impudent shouts of raging "guards" staying on the pier of the Russian military base.

Being unable to do or understand anything, Lena was lying motionlessly among someone's sacks and looking indifferently at the sky. A small colourless crab was clumsily crawling out of a crack in the rusty metal into the sun. Lena had gone through a lot of pain and had done everything she could. Her hearing seemed to have switched off. Now all her thoughts were of one thing. The baby. She was wishing the barge to go as far as possible.

The cannon shell sank the first barge straight away and tens of people went to the bottom of Sukhumi harbour. The tangerines were rhythmically rocking on the sea surface. Thousands of red, orange and green balls looked like multicoloured serpentine after a cheerful New Year night.

The second barge left the harbour and was waiting for its fate.

The motor boat approaching the pier took the position between the coast and the barge and slowed down.

"What are you doing, jerk?" the officer was shouting into his megaphone, waving his hand with a gun and shooting into the air. "Do you want war with Russia, scum bag? Come on, shoot me! Make sure you don't miss!" the officer was pointing at the tricoloured flag raised on purpose, to differ from the Georgian boats with St. Andrew's flags.

Lena recognized her husband's voice but she couldn't move to let him know she was there. The tug-boat was slowly pulling the barge leading it further and further away from the terror of the last 24 hours, from the coast of Sukhumi harbour with a Georgian cannon on the pier and from the boat with Igor.

Two sailors from the Russian motor-boat threw life-rings into the sea. After the first barge sank, every here

and there were people appearing on the surface full of tangerines. They managed to distinguish the life-rings in the orange mush, grab them and paddle clumsily to the shore. The wail of the second tug-boat horn and dreadful screams of the people in the hold of the barge were blacking out the officer's shout. Igor continued swinging his gun and shooting but in his head he could hear the words of a children's song he had heard on the radio in his childhood, "An orange sky, an orange sea..."

It was just five cables to the shore. Suddenly there was a thunderous explosion.

The captain of the motor boat launched his only torpedo into the pier without any calculations. The Georgian cannon and half of the tie-up stands broke into pieces. However, the boat was able to moor at the broken pier. Not waiting for the tie-down, both officers jumped onto shore and ran along Leon Avenue, to the houses where their families lived.

Igor was out of breath when he ran up to the familiar house. There was no one in their room. There was broken furniture, scattered clothes, smashed tableware everywhere in the house and broken hydrangea bushes outside the window. Coming downstairs, he was terrified to see the niece of the old man try to take his body off the tree.

"Where is Lena?" Igor asked quietly. He lifted the old man and took him off the tree branch. Half a minute passed but he didn't dare look at the woman, he was scared to learn the truth from her eye. She covered the old man with a blanket, glanced at Igor, looked dully somewhere and said, "On the barge with tangerines."

Igor understood everything. If she had been in the first barge, she was dead, if she was in the second one, she was on her way to Sochi.

In the morning Gagra was captured by Georgians. Their troops accomplished their goal – Abkhasia was cut off Russia. Now all Russian boats near Gagra had to go

into the open sea and were going to defend the hospital ship with refugees from Sukhumi. They were waiting for orders. The captain of the torpedo boat Alexey understood his old vessel was useless. They had twice less sailors, just two officers – he and a medical officer – and one air torpedo. So, breaking all orders, he was keen to go to Sukhumi to save his family and trying to persuade himself, repeated the same thing to himself, “One hour – there, one hour – back. The radio isn’t working. No one will know anything.”

On the broken pier, where Igor returned, there were five people from the first barge. They were pulled out by the sailors. The lieutenant didn’t ask them anything. He was scared to learn the worst. What if someone had seen his Lena. He could only wait for a miracle to happen. They had to lead the armless boat through the Georgian military vessels and make for the open sea. After that, on the way to Sochi, they could catch up with the second barge.

More than half an hour had passed but the captain was still not there. Igor was walking nervously on the deck looking in the direction of Leon Avenue. A minute later he saw Alexey appear in the middle of the road, make a couple of steps, freeze, swing his arms and crash. He couldn’t hear shots but a second later armed people in the uniform of Georgian “guards” filled the road.

“Cast off!” unexpectedly for himself, Igor raised his voice to a shout. He forgot many things they had to do and check before that order. He never remembered them.

The boat with white digits on the side “067”, obeying the only remaining officer, quickly pulled off from the shore.

Simply Maria

1.

“Br-r-ezhnev! Br-rezhnev! Br-rezhnev,” an elderly woman was saying quietly but energetically. She was sitting in a chair on the first row of an old bus, looking out of the window and repeating the name of the General secretary. She didn’t just say it, but every time she was pronouncing it with a different intonation followed with the same arm movement with her index finger stretched out. It looked like she was piercing someone with a needle. She wasn’t looking at the other passengers and they were trying to turn away and pretend they couldn’t hear anything.

Five minutes before the final bus stop, the bus usually slowed down, the driver opened the door and let the woman out. Still staying on the snowy pavement and waiting for something from the dark, frosty, winter morning, she would carry on with her convincing monologue. And the passengers, clinging to the windows, would watch her with fright.

This happened every day. The bus was not Hungarian, but from Lvov. So in winter it was warm inside except that it always smelt of petrol. From five o’clock in the morning it was travelling round the town and picking up the poultry farm workers. The cranky woman would get on the bus in the same place with a load of other passengers and in twenty minutes she would confidently get off her seat and direct her steps to the exit. Everyone

was used to her, as if she was a factory whistle. When the morning shift began people forgot about her.

The head of the killing room of the poultry farm was Yekaterina Pavlovna Nelidova. In the year of the one hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, in December, she had a baby girl. She called her Maria. At the presence of men the mother liked to say it was her present to Ilyich' jubilee. She was pretending to be uncertain which exactly Ilyich she meant. At the time they talked a lot about another Ilyich on the telly and radio. Yekaterina Pavlovna didn't have a husband so the little girl was brought up without a father.

The mother and daughter lived very poorly, in a wooden two-storey house for five families outside Lenin-grad, in the village of Gorelovo. Masha used to wake herself up every morning, get ready and go to school. After her lessons she would come home and cook dinner. Her mother would get home late at night. After her shift she had to get some shopping. Tired and nervous, she hardly had the strength to eat her food, look through her daughter's books and planner, read her a lecture, after which she would immediately fall asleep.

There was always a shortage of workers at the poultry farm. To fill the gaps in the production of seven thousand chickens a shift and to get extra money, the head of the killing room took Masha and her friends with her in the school holidays. First they were sneakily watching the cranky woman on the bus. Then, in the killing room they would put bright green plastic hats on, white backwraps, plastic aprons, the same colour as the hats, then rubber gloves. They would take forks for chicken gutting and start execution. They cut off chicken heads and took giblets out.

The only practical thing the daughter learned from her mother was sewing skills. Masha could sew trousers, dresses, shirts. Besides, she enjoyed it. After all,

it was not a duralumin tub filled with dead chickens' giblets.

After school Maria Nelidova went to the Leningrad "Badge of Honour" Order College of Light Industry and two years later she could design different garments. She was really good at sewing patterns and could use different home and foreign sewing machines. Straight after college Masha was invited to work in a co-operative shop. There she didn't lose any time and got a lot of clients. She started getting decent money. Maria glammed up and often went to the pictures with her friends. She liked to watch films about travelling, somewhere far away, to South America. She used to sing the same song to herself, "Will I ever see Brazil, Brazil, will I ever see Brazil before I die?"

When Masha was eighteen, her mother died of cancer. The company housing was taken away of course.

Having arranged with her friends, Nelidova stayed in a new place nearly every night and kept saying "I am like a young Caiman lizard. It lives at the Amazon but doesn't stay in the same place." At first she liked that romantic life. "I could live in a tent," she would say to her friends. "Why not? No parents, no home. But I have a passport so I can vote. Freedom!"

In fact, she couldn't get a ballot paper because she didn't have an official residential registration. She was signed out from the old place and she didn't have a new one.

In 1990, she got fed up with that and being despaired she decided to get together with a beginning businessman Ignat. The lad was plain-looking, with short hair, nearly bald, but he had money. At school he had not been bright but he had been doing black marketing – he used to get chewing gum from foreigners and then sell it to his school friends, a rouble for one stick. So he had been taught business since childhood.

2.

Now Masha's life turned into a wild and uncontrolled flow. One day they had a lot of money, the next day they had none. The people around her were cheering and enjoying themselves or hiding from creditors and wandering around, pale and dejected. They would keep silent and get their bags ready with the necessary things – underwear, a tracksuit and trainers. They were ready for jail, if their friendship with the state failed, or for “immersion”, if they had to hide from bandits and creditors.

In the early summer of 1992 they got a cargo transporter with instant coffee from Israel. Big blue tins, a little dented, with red letters in Hebrew, were sold quickly. People bought them without asking why the tins were dented, and they liked the letters. Ignat had got them half-price. They raised at once, glammed up and decided to go on holiday abroad, to Paris. Where else? They visited a travel agency, booked a flight and two rooms in a cheap two-star hotel in Monmartre. One room for Ignat and Maria, the other for their friends. They were also persuaded to buy tickets for three tours around Paris.

So now they were wandering around the streets of Paris, the city everyone was crazy about at the time. They didn't know the language, didn't get any education, their faces said they were ordinary and simple-minded. How could they run a business? It was mind-boggling!

Having filled their bags with little things from the shop Tati, which was in Republic Square, they got on a boat tour, looked at the sights and listened to the guide. On their right they saw City Island and Notre-Dame de Paris. They recalled an old French film – Quasimodo, Gina Lollobrigida... Then the Seine turned left and they could see Place de la Concorde. Behind it there were the Champs Elysees up to the Place de l'Etoile. However, the Champs Elysees were stretching in an opposite direction

to their ship. Before the Alexander the Third Bridge they could see Hotel des Invalides – house for disabled.. Why disabled? Masha didn't get it. Napoleon was buried there but he wasn't disabled. There, as if on purpose, they put the heart of Marshal Grouchy, who had not arrived to help Napoleon and let him get defeated. Everyone knew that from the film "Waterloo". They also saw Champ de Mars, the building of UNESCO behind it and high round towers of Conciergerie where Marie Antoinette had been imprisoned whilst waiting to be beheaded...

Pretty soon they forgot everything they had heard. They got out of the boat near the Jena Bridge. Not far from it there was the really high Eiffel Tower, lit by the lights. They say it's the most expensive property in the world. Near the bridge they were shown a place in the river where a beautiful barge used to boat at rest, in which someone famous lived, either Pierre Richard or Alain Delon. The guide didn't really know. Everyone remembered Alain, of course, and loved him so they livened immediately. Masha was not an exception. She liked brunets with delicate features and blue eyes. Sure thing!

Maria and Ignat didn't climb the Eiffel Tower, they were hungry. They got away from their friends and without thinking long popped into a cafe. They sat at the table, took a menu and stared at the foreign words. They didn't understand a thing. The first two days they had been to cafes where in the menu there was a picture next to the name of a dish. But here there was nothing. What could they do? What was more – they had also missed the tour to the Eiffel Tower, which cost at least twenty bucks. They got upset. The waiter passed by their table a few times trying to figure out if they had chosen their dishes or were still thinking.

The young businessman from Russia could wait no longer and when the waiter in the red-and-white uniform came up to them, he proudly lifted his head, strictly

looked at him and staring at his mouth, started repeating the same word, "Yum-yum!" Not to look a complete idiot, he was pronouncing it every time with different intonation and bowing his head. To do justice to the cafe staff, they were ready for anything and knew the tastes of the Russian tourists. They brought them onion soup in small bowls, then lamb ribs with sauce and peas and in the end a pot of black hot shells. There were mussels inside them. Delicious and worth remembering! They didn't get any bread. Oh, well! They thought about wine, but it was too late. The people from their group had come back from the Eiffel Tower. They all had to go on their last tour, to the Sacree Coeur, appearing white on one side of Paris.

They were tired. Tired to hang about the museums, listen to the guide with his stories of the French history, Napoleon, Danton and Mirabeau... Tired to eat a lot every day, eat the same food. Ignat was getting homesick. He felt like going to the countryside, making a shish kebab, having cold vodka and herring with onions. There would be friends around him, a guitar, playing cards...

On the contrary, Masha, who had never been to any museums before, was taking everything in, absorbing everything, like a sponge. She wanted to know if the dead French pilot had been found. She even remembered the full name of the author of "The Little Prince" – Antoine Marie Jean-Baptiste Roger de Saint-Exupery! She would really like to stay longer in the Louvre where she saw a painting of a woman enjoying the babies playing in the garden. "How I would like a life like that!" Maria thought in her dreams and stopped.

Ignat grabbed her hand and pulled her away from Raphael's painting. They had to catch up with the rest of the group and Masha came back to sour reality. One of their friends threw up on the floor in the room with the Mona Lisa. They had had too much to drink the night before when they had been playing cards. They were not

like other people! So what if they were drunk, or, let's say, they were not sober! They had paid for the tickets, they were walking trying not to move a lot, only glancing everywhere. But that idiot! He was not like other people!

Immediately a woman in a pure white gown, rubber gloves and a special trolley appeared. She poured sawdust from a box onto the floor and without taking notice of the tourists around her gathered the breakfast of Ignat's mate into a shiny nickel dustpan with a mop, put everything into a small red plastic bucket and disappeared.

Masha tried to persuade her boyfriend to go out the remaining three days but he stayed in the hotel and didn't let her out so that she didn't waste money. Of course, she got upset. She knew that in some time she would have to drag Ignat to Brazil. That was for sure. She saw in a film giant lizards in the Amazon swallow big shells, which could even contain a pearl.

The woman sitting next to her on a coach said, "You are stupid! What do you need a lizard for? Let your boyfriend just give you pearls without any lizards. What would you do with a lizard? How would you get a pearl out? Are you mad? That's a big problem!"

In the hotel room where Masha and Ignat stayed all their business friends gathered in the evening. One night they were drinking and playing cards and the room was filled with smoke. Suddenly they saw smoke creeping over the fine sofa. Someone was hurrying to return to the card game and threw a hopper on the sofa. Now there was a hole the size of a saucer. They all drooped and sobered up immediately. They would need to pay for the sofa and their money was running out. One of them suggested they put a cushion on that place, another said they could buy a throw and cover the hole. Maria surprised them all with her quickwittedness and confidence.

"Listen! Listen to me! Go to a shop and get a hand-saw and big plastic bags. We will put the telly with rock

music on really loudly, saw the sofa into small pieces and take them all out as if there was nothing in here." The businessmen were listening to her instructions and standing in a row with their drunk heads sticking out, cigarettes in their mouths. "You will find the most convenient rubbish skip," she said to Ignat, "there you will only leave the contents of the rubbish bags, bring the bags back to the hotel room," Masha was instructing the card players eagerly.

A whirlwind started. The sacks were filled with clothes and taken out of the hotel or on another floor so that the maids could see clothes in them. Between the blank journeys they were taking out the pieces of the sofa in the same sacks.

The next day a cleaning lady came. She looked around and started yelling. In French, of course. A receptionist came and started talking nearly in Russian in her fright. Asking them where the sofa was. They had already got used to their guests from Russia taking towels, slippers, shampoo bottles or sewing kits. But the sofa!

Ignat couldn't help scoffing. He came up to the cleaning lady, turned his back on her, stuck his back and slapped his buttocks.

The gesture was deadly expressive. Both French women fell into a muse and left the room.

That's how Maria's meeting with Paris, European art and travelling finished. Maybe, her last meeting. Ignat was completely out of his mind. He thought, "Just a waste of time. I should have done some buy-sell business while watching all those graves and houses."

3.

The Leningrad flat that Ignat bought after his luck with Israeli coffee was at the same time his home, office and a conference hall. In the hallway there sat a young

secretary who had graduated from the philological faculty of the university. She answered the phone with a lot of enthusiasm. "Yes, Denikin's headquarter's speaking. Who? One second..."

"Stop yacking on the phone," Ignat would interrupt her. "No one is in. Did you get it? Just write down all the messages and don't say anything. But if they ring from Hungary, call me straight away."

But the secretary couldn't help it and the next time someone rang she answered, "Headquarter of the Horse Guards speaking", or "Business-centre Strawberry Meadow named after comrade Bergman speaking".

The New Year was coming but the Hungarian champagne hadn't arrived yet. They spent nearly all their money on it, that "Madame Pompadour". Luckily they hired a refrigerator for two thousand dollars. Other people used usual trucks with canvas tops cheaply. So they didn't mind now. When the lorries drove down the Tatrás, all the cargo had it because of the pressure fall – the tops of the bottles were cut off. But they were still waiting for the champagne. The following day would be New Year. After receiving it they had to clear entry customs, unload and deliver to shops.

By now they all knew they had run into bucks with the champagne. The peculiarity of that product was that after the 31st of December nobody wanted it. Apart from aristocrats and degenerates as the honoured artist said in the film "The Diamond Arm". There were no aristocrats yet in the country, but there was the second type. They were the only hope!

The carbonated potion came on New Year's Eve. The shops didn't take it so they had to send it to the warehouse. As they didn't have any more money, they hired a warehouse without central heating. It was nearly empty – some wood and building materials and their boxes of champagne. Now they had to wait until the 8th of March!

What an awful thing to happen – in February the temperature fell to minus twenty five degrees! The security guard rang “the headquarters of Denikin” and asked them to listen – in the receiver there were frequent cracks, similar to the radiation reading tool.

“These are the bottles bursting... Hello! Can you hear? Hello! What shall I do?” the security guard was shouting.

Maria was the first to respond. She grabbed the phone from her unlucky hubby and started her distinct instructions, “Burn the wood. There is also some polyethylene there, big rolls of it. Pull it over the top. Get a fan from somewhere or blow the smoke under the polyethylene...

She was a decisive woman. They all learned it. Firstly, she was the boss’ girlfriend. Secondly, she usually knew what she was talking about.

A third of the products burst. In the rest of the bottles there was settling, they would not be able to sell them. So Mashka had an idea! She was a genius! She suggested they sell those bottles to restaurants and cafes for half price. “That’s right. When they serve champagne there,” the secretary gasped, “they usually cover the bottle with a white tea towel not to leave marks and not to freeze their hands or the champagne not to get warm and also to take the drops off the neck of the bottle.”

Everyone turned their heads at the same time and stared at the “staff philologist”. The businessmen’s eyes were shining with surprise and respect. They used to think the tea towel was to wipe the table... or hands with.

One of those days of February frost Ignat came home gloomy and anxious. “That’s it, Mashka!”

Looking at his white face, Maria decided that her boyfriend’s business had gone out of the window and they had to escape urgently not to be killed. However, Ignat was mumbling something, impossible to understand. Masha told him to start from the very beginning, “My heart is pumping blood to the right half of the body and

not to the left side," Ignat, being white from fright, said distinctly but with difficulty."

"How is that?"

"I went to the warehouse today... So cold! I put on a sheepskin coat and winter boots. So, most of my body feels warm, but the left side is cold."

"Are you telling me this? You are such an idiot, Ignat, even after you bought the diploma! I did tell you not to buy a coat in the Arab quarter. You didn't listen, decided to save the money, so here you are now! There is nothing wrong with your heart! Where is your coat?" Masha took the new brown sheepskin coat Ignat had bought in Paris, turned it inside out and burst out laughing. The left sleeve was without real fur. Just faux fur, that was it.

The time passed, but their material wealth did not change for the better. Maria was often recalling the Louvre, the wonderful painting with babies which radiated peacefulness. She had to do something. She had to look for a way to make money if silly Ignat couldn't. Her feelings for the young and successful at first businessman were fading. In a month they were in debt and had to sell their flat and move to a room in a communal flat. The secretary from the business-centre "Strawberry meadow" resigned. Instead of the beds they had folding beds, and unpacked bags with clothes. Ignat would turn up for a couple of minutes, slave-like, he was trying to escape from creditors and it could finish him off. "I am not in if anyone asks. I am transporting metal to Belgium," That was what Maria heard from him. Then he would disappear for another week. Then again...

"Well, that's it," Maria told herself confidently, "I've had enough. I need to disappear now. Or they will claim his debts from me. He doesn't want a baby, he can't go to Brazil with me, he owes everyone all the time..." She felt really down and she left.

4.

The train "Saint Petersburg - Warsaw" arrived strictly on schedule. Around forty people with bags, sacks and suitcases came out of the compartment carriage. Four young girls had met on the train and were now standing aside. They were here to work outside Warsaw as housemaids or nannies and were waiting for someone to meet them.

Soon they saw an elderly woman in an old long grey coat. Under it they could see several multicoloured silk skirts. Her shiny brown boots were tight on her plump clumsy legs. She was holding a stick with a white notice. They could hardly see the name of the firm, written in Russian in a thick blue felt-tip pen.

"Is everyone here from this carriage?" were the first words she said. She had a harsh voice of chronic rhinitis. However, the old woman was talking Russian without any accent. "There must be two more girls. Have you lost them? Where will I find them now?" the old woman was obviously not happy. "The minibus won't wait long. It won't."

She said something in Polish, fussed, then waved her arm and slowly walked towards the exit of the station with her brood. The girls kept quiet, looking at each other and shrugging their shoulders, thinking they had not seen any other girls.

Maria Nelidova had earned a good reputation on their way to Poland. They would have got hot boiled water and tea in tumblers and glass-holders. The tea was without soda and with fresh teabags. They all had come here in the same compartment. The tickets had been paid for by the agent. Before the last stop Masha had a chat with the stewardess trying to find out any useful information. She learned that every week there were groups of girls going to work in Poland. The latest two months they had

been travelling more often. The stewardess hadn't seen anyone going back. Maybe, they travelled one by one? She hadn't seen any groups.

Near the station in a side lane there was a minibus. The girls took their seats cheerfully and the bus drove off. They didn't ride long. In half an hour they got off, took their bags and went to a big wagon, or to be exact, a cold storage truck. Maria felt something was wrong, she grabbed one of the girls and pulled her. There were about fifteen steps to a forest. But that was a strange forest. It could end in a hundred metres...

Right there six husky blokes jumped out of the truck. They threw the girls on the ground, tied their hands behind their backs, gagged them, then pulled them into the truck, threw them on the floor and piled mattresses on top of them. The iron crimped door shut down. There was no light or fresh air inside. The blokes sealed the door and got into two cars, and the truck slowly gathered speed. There was a long way ahead.

They went through Poland, a part of Germany and Holland. They stopped at customs. There they checked the seal on the door, signed some papers and the cold storage truck with "frozen meat" continued driving according to the delivery note. They finally stopped after twenty four hours, on a bank of a canal, five kilometres from Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

There was an open forest around them, no houses or roads. On the bank there was a moored barge with a closed top. There were armed guards in black jumpsuits with truncheons. There were two minibuses nearby, the same as in Warsaw.

"They wet the mattresses again, the bitches! Can't have enough!" one of the guards shouted in Russian, he climbed inside the wagon through the opened door. He kicked the tied-up helpless women checking if they were alive, then he called another guard for help. Togeth-

er they picked up one “bitch” by her arms and legs and threw her on the ground. The body fell, the girl moved and groaned. Two other blokes came up and carried her inside the barge. Then another body was thrown from the wagon, and another one...

The girls regained conscience in the hold. They were naked, tied up by one arm to the bed. Beside them, there were ten other girls who had hoped to earn easy money. Near each bed there was a bowl and a jug of canal water. For drinking, washing or weeing, whatever they wanted. As soon as they came to their senses, twenty blokes stumbled in the hold. They were not guards and dressed differently. They must have been local workers or emigrants. Many of them spoke some Russian. All hell broke loose...

It was impossible and useless to fight them back. All the positions were thought through, the tied-up arm was changed every three hours, the bowls were taken out and the water was topped-up into the jugs. Sometimes the women were given dirty sheets to cover themselves with at night. In the morning everything would start again. There were four or five “goes” a day. It gave the owners of the “company” a profit of five thousand dollars a day. Or a hundred and fifty thousand a month – just from one barge which didn’t even move. How many were there around – Arabs, Blacks, Asians? There were enough women for everybody.

Masha had understood everything in Poland when she saw the wagon. She had to find out where they were. What would happen to them later? It was clear they were alive witnesses of abduction and slavery in the middle of civilized Europe. They would get rid of them. But how? Masha couldn’t think of any happy ending. She had to wait. Suffer and wait.

If someone tried to struggle and prevent to satisfy natural needs, they would severely beat them up. The

first time in front of everyone, next time they would carry them outside. The girls would hear the screams of the victim but in the end they would disappear. A new girl would be brought to the vacant space. After the first beating some girls were eager to report of any escape attempts to the guards.

Maria had always had a habit of wearing a thin piece of cloth around her neck, like a decoration. They hadn't ripped it off. They hadn't even noticed it. Inside that cloth there was a tiny pocket with a needle and cotton, and the cotton was marked by knots twenty centimetres a piece.

A whole month of suffering was coming to its end. She already knew what they did with the girls after that. After a month no one survived, they fell ill. To avoid infections, the girls were taken away and must have been drowned in the canal. Maria learned to pull the cleanest bloke from each party. It lessened the chance of falling ill. So long everything went smoothly if this word was suitable for her situation.

Once she asked yet another man to carry her over to another bed, next to the porthole. It took him a long time to untie her, then tie her up again, but now Masha was next to the light and could see what was happening outside. At night she measured the diameter of the porthole. Excellent! She would definitely get through it. She needed to know what was on the other side of the window. Where would she go and what would she wear?

She had to do everything immediately. She didn't know what the local guards would do when they found out she had been carried to another bed. Masha started to rip the rope on the left hand with the needle. Carefully, thread after thread. Two hours later she just had to pull her hand and the rope fell apart. She used the needle again to rip up the mattress and sew a vest and knickers. The cotton finished on the last stitch.

It was dark inside the barge. The guard came out of the hold to the toilet. Masha slowly, without saying a word to anyone, stretched her arm to the porthole, turned the catch and the window opened. She stood on her tiptoes, then stepped on the edge of the cable tomb and climbed out of the window waist-high. Now she had to slip down clinging onto the rough unpainted barge board.

5.

May Day was beginning. The day of solidarity of all people on the planet. Crickets were rattling and frogs were croaking. There were lots of mosquitoes. She had not noticed them inside the barge. Now that she was free, they were in her way, they were buzzing, stinging and following her.

Maria Nelidova was trying to find a police station, walking through a park, along the paths of fine gravel. Here and there she would see dull street lamps. Her bare feet were pricked by sharp gravels. There was no blood but her feet were covered with scratches. All her body was aching. In the park she would meet men and women wandering in some crazy clothes or capes made out of tropical bird feathers. They were carrying paper orange windmills. Their painted faces were indifferent. They were either drunk or junked up. Some of them were easing themselves. Masha, barefoot, uncombed, in her striped knickers and vest, looking like a concentration camp prisoner, didn't stand out among the other people on May Day. Tall Dutch, like clowns on stilts, looked down upon her. No one cared about anyone.

By the morning, behind the edge of the park, Masha could see stone houses with high roofs and rare cars. Just near the park there was a one-storey building. Its windows were shining with yellow light, around it there were a lot of cars with long flashing lights across the

vehicle body and with the word "Politie" on the doors. Masha stopped. She felt like storming into the building, falling on the floor and screaming. She would shout as loudly as she could. The last trees of the park were still separating her from the police station. She was about to leave her hiding-place when a familiar scuffed minibus pulled up near the entrance. Three guards in black got out of it. Confidently they went into the police station. Masha strained herself and backed up, then she turned around and bolted.

The day before they celebrated the Queen's birthday in the Netherlands, today it was May Day. What would be tomorrow? Maria could only think of running up to people and falling on the floor... In a shop. Anywhere...

In May mornings were quickly becoming light in Amsterdam. Early in the morning there were hardly any people outside the town. A rare car would drive through the flashing traffic lights, an empty tram would quietly ride or a cyclist with a bag on the back of his bike would ride along the cycle lane. Small shop owners were lifting the heavy metal shutters and opening beautiful window-sills with food, clothes, equipment on the lit shelves.

After her bad luck with the local police Maria Neludova couldn't recover herself for a long time. She locked herself in a mobile toilet, turned the light off and shivering of cold or fear felt her helplessness for the first time. What could she do now? Where would she go? She knew that if she came to a shop or someone's house she would be taking a big risk. She didn't know the language, she had no documents and no clothes. People wouldn't understand her or think she was begging. If she went to a police station they would keep her there and probably put her in a cell. They would sort her through later or they might chuck her out so they didn't have to deal with an illegal immigrant. What if they were all connected, like the police station near the park?

The worst thing was she was wasting precious time. The scumbags and the barge could disappear any time. The people she had seen near the police station were certainly raising the alarm and looking for her.

Maria understood that night, going through the park, that she was not in Poland or even Germany, she was in Holland. She didn't even know how to speak English... In this country they sounded like swans - it was impossible to understand them. She had done the right thing not going into someone's house. She had been told that people in Holland didn't stand any variations from the norm. Everything standing out was contraindicative. Everywhere and always. In behaviour, work and even windows of all houses.

But the main thing was she had to quench her desire to punish her offenders immediately. It couldn't be done so fast. Especially in a strange country. She couldn't relax! Nothing had ended yet. Any moment she could be found and caught. What could she do? Wait out! Get lost somewhere... Get some clothes and only after that set off to search for justice! She needed to get dressed... and have a wash! A wash? Exactly! Do they have a bathhouse anywhere?

She picked up an empty orange bottle and broke into a run. She was running fast and waving an empty fanta bottle trying to look like those men and women she had seen in the park.

6.

In two or three sections of blocks she saw a familiar word on a house wall "Sauna". She could recognize it in any language.

It was early. However, the loud-voiced Dutch were different from all other people, Maria remembered. They probably went to saunas any time of the day.

Climbing over a high hedge of prickly bushes of barberries, she found herself on an open-air ground with water barrels hanging on a long crossbar. They would turn over as soon as you pulled the string. There were bushes of juniper everywhere. Paths covered with flat stone were running from the hedge into the hall where she could see white clouds of steams moving into the fresh morning air. She had to get warm and look around, see what was where. She had to understand where the sauna opened to know when to belt off. The steam-rooms were separated with a glass door. She couldn't see anything inside, just steam. Maria took off her striped clothes at last, entered one of the rooms and found herself in a Turkish bath.

Five naked men and women were silently sitting on the warm marble seats. On the ceiling there were small blue lights looking like the starry sky. At the entrance on the wooden hooks there hung white sheets and coloured robes. Maria felt like taking one of them, a warm terry robe... To put something on for the first time in a month, apart from those knickers and vest that she had made herself. No, she shouldn't. It wasn't time yet. She wrapped someone's sheet around her body and went to another room with a fireplace in the middle of it. Around it there were deck-chairs with wooly soft blankets on them. Along the wall she saw glass shelves with fruits, juices and salads. You could eat as much as you wanted. Maria stuffed herself and lay down to sleep. The wood was nicely crackling in the fireplace and pleasant warmth was filling the room. She fell asleep straight away.

In a couple of hours, when her inflamed brain cooled down and she could reason calmly, Maria woke up and quickly decided what to do. To steal someone's clothes and find... legal rivals of that lousy barge.

Taking someone's clothes was not that easy. Metal lockers where the visitors of the sauna kept their

belongings, were closed with a magnet key. The key looked like a small watch on everyone's wrist. She would need to take the key off someone's wrist and scan it at the exit. There they would identify whether you had used any facilities, for instance, the restaurant or the massage room. If you had, you would have to pay. Not knowing all the tricks against thieves, she could be caught easily without even starting the war for justice. If she broke a locker she would have to leave the same way she came in, through the hedge... Maria didn't want that. She must have feminized in the warm and clean place. It was not worth it to attract attention.

She walked through the corridors, looked inside the massage room and the hairdresser's, then she went into a room with no sign on the door. Masha was in a big room with shelves along the walls and one bulb in the ceiling. It was a Klondike! There were shampoos, gels, eau de toilette, make-up, terry robes of any colour... In the corners, on plain metal hooks there hung someone's clothes, probably belonging to the people who worked there. Behind the baskets with sheets and robes she saw another door. Masha carefully opened it and saw the lobby of the sauna where the visitors paid entrance fees and scanned their magnet tickets, where there were boutiques with underwear and sportswear. Here she could mix with the idle Dutch who decided to wash off the orange paints covering their bodies from the night before.

Maria Nelidova put on some strangers' clothes, took bottles of shampoo and shower gel and headed for the exit. She left the sauna and set off to find the Red Light District. She didn't have any doubts that she would be able to tell everything and persuade people to go to a police station with her, even though she knew neither the local language, nor English.

7.

Masha found the biggest brothel in Amsterdam. It was not difficult. All foreign tourists were going there. So she found herself in De Wallen Street. There, along the ground floor, several hundred red windows were shining. But there was no one in the windows. In the back of the district, on massive wooden doors under an arch there hung a piece of paper with one word in English "Administration". Maria went in. The stairs were so steep she had to lean on the steps in front when walking up them. There was only one door upstairs and it was wide open. She saw three men in the fuggy room. Two of them were snoring on the sofas in their clothes and one man in glasses and with long black hair was sitting at the table and making notes in a magazine. On a plate next to him there was sweet suet cut into pieces and a loaf of fresh brown bread.

A lot of women came to that "office" every day so the men were used to all sorts of aberration. But what the bloke saw this time made him burst out laughing, which interrupted the sweet dreams of the other two men. They stirred once or twice, shouted something incomprehensible and fell asleep again.

In the doorway there was a pretty young woman in very wide black trousers turned up to her knees and with a wide belt. She was also wearing a green t-shirt with some crooked orange letters on it and a men's broad-shouldered pink jacket without buttons. On her feet she had shoes with thick high heels. A big brown cocked cap was sitting on a pretty head with long fair hair. She would have looked like a clown if she didn't have a pretty face, bright blue eyes and shiny wavy hair. The woman smelt of expensive eau de toilette. She confidently entered the room, made an arm gesture for him not to stand up – he wasn't going to, anyway – looked around, saw a ragged

leather armchair in the corner and sat and crossed her legs.

"Hello," Maria said proudly and seriously, then added, "Bonjour."

The black-haired man turned to the plump man lying on the sofa and pushed him, "Hey, Nickolay, maishka!"

Maria didn't expect to hear her name, she was surprised and pointing at herself, she chattered, "Yes! I am Mashka! I am Masha!.."

The man in glasses was from Yugoslavia and by one word he figured out the girl was from the former USSR so he decided to wake his partner who had come from the Ukraine to Holland two months before. He said "Wake up" in Serbian but Maria thought it was her name.

Nickola stretched, opened his eyes and burst into laughing when he saw the girl sitting opposite him.

"It's a clown from the Ukraine," the man sitting at the table explained.

When he calmed down, the Ukrainian asked, "Who are you?"

His voice was so hoarse that at first Maria didn't understand him.

"I am Masha. I am from Petersburg," she chattered again pointing at the man in glasses and being surprised, "He knows who I am."

"OK, you are from Petersburg, so what? Who are you from?"

"No one. I am on my own. Don't think I am looking for a job..."

"Well, be quick!"

"Will you listen to me? Promise you will."

"Damn! Who are you talking to? Are you mad, woman?"

"Can't you see?" the third man said, he must have been from the Ukraine, too. He woke up and now tried to

understand what this friend had in common with that...
"She's stoned or high."

Nickola suddenly remembered the rules of the market economy, figured out the woman was not from the Ukraine and added, "What will I get for that?"

"First listen, then we'll decide. All you need to do is to listen."

"You are stubborn! OK, come on! But you'll have to work for me for a week. How about that?"

"Easy! Why a week? I could do longer than a week."

Stroking her blonde hair with her hands, Maria thought how monotonous that world was but she tried to let him see she was no stranger to what Nickola was asking from her.

Two days later the illegal rivals of the "Red lights" were found. The women were sent to a hospital, the barge was towed off and its owners, both nominal and real, were arrested. The guards opened fire on police out of Chinese pump-action shotguns and they were shot. Two minibus drivers and three policemen tied to the bandits were soon found and thrown into prison. Two girls who had been on the train with Maria agreed to become witnesses. The third girl had been pulled somewhere by the guards before.

As Nelidova was the first to inform of the crime, she was in the Witness Protection Programme. She got a residence permit and was offered to be hidden. Maria refused, she was healthy and could hide herself. Where was the best place not to be found? Here, at Nickola's... in the "Red lights". Very nice! As if nothing had changed. Just more comfortable and she was given money.

The trials lasted longer than a year. The two witnesses the government helped to hide were not lucky. One disappeared. The law-enforcement authorities tried to find her in vain. Bandits found the other girl and tried

to kill her. She survived but her thighs and arms would remember the blows with a rusty metal pipe.

All that time Maria was working by the ancient profession she had acquired in civilized Europe. She paid the rent of her window for three months ahead, rented a flat, married a young local artist who was selling his Amsterdam sketches near the museum of Van Gogh. Then everything span as fast as a kaleidoscope: she got a citizenship, had a baby boy, got divorced, got all benefits as a single mother and got a council flat outside Amsterdam, according to the Decree of Queen Beatrix.

Last Drops of Rain

1.

Everything is black around and full of flickering stars. You are alone in this fantasy world, dissolving in it, can touch the stars – you just need to stretch your arm... There is no plane, there is only you and music. It sounds in your heart, makes you recollect, dream, think of the Eternal... Only when you fall in an air pit, the hysterical sound of the booming engine reminds you of reality. In the places where the little “Cessna” falls, the dark silhouettes of mountain tops appear, like in photo paper. The light scattering in passages and highlands looked stationary a second ago but now are rushing towards you and you can comprehend and sense with each of your cells they are not the stars.

The night will go away soon and the sharp contours of Mont Blanc will appear over the morning mist. Every turn and descent here become a risk. The landing runway is short and narrow, it is inclined and starts near by the cliff. In order not to hit the cliff you have got to discern and cut it fine. Nothing can be seen down below. Powerful air flows are ripping snow dust off the slopes. The snow dust is covering the aerodrome, shining, reflecting the sun rays and trembling. It is stirring as if someone invisible got under that gigantic white blanket, has been sleeping peacefully but has woken up now and is trying to get out.

Every flight like that gives joy. You can see the snowy mountain tops on the background of green meadows,

dark blue woods, foothills and endless blue sky! But it is not just the beauty that draws you into the clouds. The main thing is a contrast between the delight of nature and acute sense of danger.

The Alps with a landing in Courchevel, a flight over the Pyrenees and at last Malaga are all left behind. You can relax in some town nearby today.

The winter in Marbella is cloudy and boring but the air remains warm and humid. Among the loose inflorescences of white heather, which have not been burnt in the summer heat, in many places there are high stems of *Strelitzia*. Its flowers look like magic birds with long beaks, they stick their heads with bright feathers out and anxiously look into the distance, protecting the peace of the seaside town.

Suddenly it starts raining and an air flow comes off the mountains. It is dashing down, making its way between the high buildings of the hotels. The embankment becomes empty, flower scents disappear and the people who have just been walking along the sea line hide in a wind-proof cafe. Waiting for the weather to change, they watch the fountain jets with an interest. The jets suddenly disappear and a gigantic cloud of water sprays flows in the air.

For the past year Anton had fallen in love with this town and was happy to suddenly wake up here after a stressful week of everyday flights from Switzerland to Spain and back. He was walking along a narrow lane of the Old town and peering at the ancient building of the Santiago Chapel or staring indifferently at colourful hats, cardigans and scarves hanging outside numerous shops. The ripe oranges ripped off the trees with the wind were now rolling disorderly down the patterned tiles to the avenue, under the wheels of the passing cars. Anton was going up, towards the thin streamlets, shining in silver from the shop window lights, and was fearing to slip if he trod on an orange fruit.

Suddenly something made him stop outside a big window. There was a coffee-shop in front of him. Anton could feel a delight spreading through his veins, a delight from the smell of slightly bitter coffee, vanilla, almond and marzipan batter, from plenty of goodies decorated with cream, from churros, bursting with heat. Looking forward to the sin of gluttony, he went into the confectionery heaven and saw a group of people at a big table near the window on the right.

Two men of respectable age were proving something busily to each other, three young women with the same checked shawls on their shoulders were sitting, talking and smiling placidly. One of them adjusted something in the clothes of the little boy – the playful little one was around five – then she waved her arm lightly... Anton would have recognized the gesture from thousands...

That was Katya.

2.

They met for the first time around ten years ago, on New Year's eve, in a chalet of mutual friends. Anton fancied her straight away, even though she was there with her boyfriend, a businessman, who tried to follow her everywhere. Slim, with regular features and big light-brown eyes, she looked like a mischievous and careless daydreamer. However, Anton was attracted to her by something unexplainable, not her beauty. It could have been her arm movement, light and hardly noticeable, as if she was brushing off someone's molestation, or some low notes in her voice, like smokers, affected by cold, had, with a pleasant velvet hoarseness. He liked her eye look, which sparkled from under her eyelashes and was playful, gentle and indiscreet at the same time.

The visitors were introduced to each other, they drank to the old year, had a dance but didn't manage to open

champagne to the chime of bells. First the cork broke. The second bottle that the host got straight away must have been too cold and wouldn't open at all. Then, forgetting to make a wish, the company clinked their glasses of plain red wine and ran out of the lounge with a chimney into the porch, decorated with twinkling lights. The hosts called their visitors to the shore of the frozen gulf where they could enjoy the festive fireworks and an icy castle made by a local handyman.

It had been raining the whole of New Year's eve, the temperature dropped only in the evening and at night it started snowing. The icy castle had started melting but was now even more beautiful and looked like Gaudi's constructions. The fireworks to celebrate the New Year didn't surprise anyone. There were sparkles, noise, coloured flame, then a few red and green stars shot up, lightened the ice, then slowly died out and loudly sizzled having fallen into the snow. The performance seemed to have finished. The floating clouds covered the full moon and it got dark. Someone inflamed the sparklers and handed them over to the guests. Then everyone rushed to look for the unburned sleeves of squibs.

The next volley of petards was unexpected and loud. The dogs of the hosts, running and chasing a ball in the snowy ice, wagged their tails and snuggled up to Katya, for some reason choosing her out of all the people. They were spinning and pushing their snouts into her knees and Katya lost her balance, stumbled, slipped over and fell into the soft snow. She screamed, her fur hat fell off her head, her hair scattered around her face. The sparkler fell off her hand spilling cold sparks and the dogs got frightened even more, and ran home.

A moment later in the bustle someone leaned over Katya. Playing, she raised herself with her elbow and stretched her arm forward. Anton was standing in front of her. Trying to help her, he bent down, put his arms

around Katya's waist and set her on her legs. At that very moment he slipped over, fell and dropped her over himself. Surprised, they were lying without moving for a few seconds. Her long hair smelt of lavender and touched Anton's face pleasantly. Her wide open eyes with a sparkle of slyness were looking at him expectantly. He heard her breathe deeply and with his body he felt Katya's attracting intimacy. Suddenly he started kissing her. Dreading for this accidental sweet moment to end, he was quickly kissing her neck, cheeks, eyes... At last his hot kisses met Katya's responsive lips.

A bright flash of the volley lightened everything around and immediately separated them. Some time later, after having shouted and groaned of dramatic or sincere delight, the party returned inside to continue the interrupted feast. Anton and Katya didn't talk to each other. Watching her, her every gesture and smile, Anton was looking for and could find a sign or signal that only he could understand.

3.

He had been interested in sport, an air club and an urge to take risks since his childhood and she had always loved music, singing, family harmony and peace of mind. They both had graduated from different universities two years ago, but they both had a Diploma in Economics. They had a scientific career ahead and the future was clear and pre-determined. Then suddenly there was a fall! The country didn't exist any more. Everything was spinning like in a kaleidoscope: science was disappearing, business was starting and falling apart straight away, money was arising and vanishing, partners were betraying, friends were scattering away. Only dollars were needed and only success interested people.

From nowhere there appeared a well-known music producer who pulled Katya into a different life: music,

songs in English, fans, decent money from expensive parties, tours abroad. Her viewers were going crazy from her flexibility and appeal. Everyone was dazzled in her warm, deep voice similar to Tanita Tikaram's. Katya was listened to, admired and it gave her pleasure. She could certainly understand her career was a lottery, it depended on her relationship with the producer. It was show business – one wrong glance could end everything.

Anton could also feel he was losing something really important in his life. He noticed in time and threw himself into a whirlpool of poetry, started learning French and then was sucked down with the sky. Soon his parents died in a car crash and he was left on his own. Anton needed money and he started making business plans, like a true economist. Some of them were carried on successfully and the businessmen would give their savior second hand cars or holidays abroad. From that manna from heaven he managed to save a large sum and went to Austria. There he was hired to work in a small airline. They hired him because he had a certificate of Vilnius international air school, around two hundred flight hours on a single-engined aircraft and – the main thing – he knew the company president's son.

4.

Katya and Anton lived separate lives and often were far away from each other. In spite of the fact their meeting ended unexpectedly strangely, they met second and third times... They tried to protect themselves from thousands of fine points of tasteless everyday life, from everything burdensome and risky in order to experience the strong feeling, similar to love at first sight, again and again.

Every time Anton came to his home city after months of being away, he used to walk along the

morning downtown streets, pass by Kuznechny market, still closed, enjoy the newly reconstructed chapel with a burning lamp in it and go to the yard he already knew well. In the old block of flats among the narrow windows in the second floor there were two Katya's. Hiding behind the slide in the playground, he would be watching her windows for a long time, vainly trying to see her silhouette. He could have gone upstairs and rung her bell of course! But Anton didn't want to. Katya was always patronized by men from show business: musicians, poets, producers. He knew that, he saw her fellows but he never was jealous. He also had similar connections. So, when he was standing outside Katya's flat, he was always waiting. In case she turned the light off and came out.

If she came out on her own, he used to hide and follow her. Now and again some trees or a clumsy trolleybus hid her from him. Fearing she would disappear or turn into a lane, he would hurry to pass the obstruction and when he saw her again he would stop to take a sigh of relief. It would carry on for a long time until he got a chance to overrun her discreetly and come to close quarters with her, representing a very busy man, and ask her confusedly, "Katya?! Is it you? Hi.."

She would leave everything and they would take a train outside the city, to a quietly babbling river hidden by the lilac bushes. Sometimes they would wander around the woods.

Once behind the bright scattering of the wild-flowers they saw a huge yellowish-grey field. Katya and Anton went into the middle of it and lay there for a long time on the warm ground. There was nothing better for Katya than his gentle hands, just as there was nothing better for him than Katya's soft hair next to his face.

Later on they were looking into the sky and the bright autumn blue colours were peeping through the clouds.

The blue was being crossed with a thin white stripe, it was a jet plane trail. Suddenly the trail ended and high up in the sky a bang could be heard. Katya flinched, looked at Anton anxiously and squeezed his hand... Around them there was a continuous wood of the yellow wheat stems, reeling in the light wind ripe spikes and thin corn-flowers... In the sky, dropping its usual white trail, the shiny dot continued to move.

5.

They had not seen each other for nearly a year. Katya came to Vancouver with her company for Christmas week. They were having three days of concerts, then three days of rest, then Calgary, Toronto and Montreal. By then Anton had been flying along the Atlantic coast from California to Vancouver for six months, serving charter flights. Now he had a week off in snowy British Columbia.

Having glanced at a poster by chance, Anton saw the name of a Russian music group and the familiar singer's name. The incomparable feelings suddenly came back to life, filled him and wouldn't go. Obeying the call of his heart, he walked through the town to the Theatre of Queen Elizabeth.

The tour was finishing, it was the last day. Anton got off-stage, wandered behind the curtains, among the storage rooms, side stage with sceneries lying carelessly until he found himself in a narrow corridor with dressing rooms where he could find Katya at last. She was sitting on a chair opposite a big mirror in a wooden patterned frame and taking off her make-up with wet wipes, her arms moving as if she was brushing something off. In the table, on the floor, on the sofa near the wall there were flowers...

"Katya!? Is it you? Hi!" Anton said quietly, like a password. She was startled.

Then there was a night. It was like their first night...

The dawn was barely breaking through. Katya glanced at Anton. An unruly lock on the top of his head made him look childish and his face looked so dear that she wanted to stroke his closed eyes, touch his unshaven cheeks and muscled shoulders...

Yes, she fell in love with Anton the moment she saw his grey eyes reminding her of the autumn rain. And those long eyelashes! They tickled her when they first kissed! How shy he was then! When Anton fell on the snow near Katya, he was lying and waiting for something. It only lasted a second but Katya thought it was an eternity. How strange she had forgotten about that. She could remember it now. She remembered the tiny scar on his cheek. He said it was caused by broken glass in the poor landing. Katya noticed the scar straight away and wanted to touch it with her lips...But the fireworks! Everything started with them and finished with them, too.

Katya emerged from the stream of her memories, she got up, wrapped herself in the duvet and went up to the window. Big thick snowflakes were falling on the ground. The street lamps were still on and their yellow light reminded her of the passionate last night. The dawn was special and hopeful. Tiptoeing, Katya cracked the window open and tried to catch the snowflakes in her palm. She wanted to make a wish while they had not melted. But the snowflakes were melting in her warm palm and turned into drops of water... "How fast everything's going!" Katya suddenly thought and unexpected tears rolled out of her eyes. Anton woke up, came up to her and tried to look in Katya's face kissing her, but she was turning away – she didn't want him to see her tears. Then Anton took Katya by her shoulders, turned her around and started kissing her. His lips were gently taking the tears off her cheeks and eyelashes. The light cover slowly fell down showing her fragile shoul-

der, white boobs and the tanned velvet skin of her attractive thigh... His strong arms held Katya's waist and he whispered, "I will always be with you..." Every cell of her body was shivering from his warm words and she felt like freezing and stopped breathing in order to prolong the moment... In her imagination that was how heaven looked – snowy, with a huge moon shining in the gloomy morning sky, she would be standing near the window for ever and watching the snow.

They didn't go outside for two days staying in the place Anton was renting when he came there. They hardly ate anything for two days, didn't think of anything but she was dreaming...

Their last morning came. Katya was flying in a cockpit for the first time in her life. She wanted to plunge into the endless blue which could watch her Anton so often! She wanted to touch the clouds with her hands, see the sun closer! The toy Cessna was going into the sky smoothly. Below them there were thin black strings of roads on the ground covered with snow and multicoloured houses looking like toys.

And the sky! His sky had become now so dear to her... Another air-pocket – and her pulse and heartbeat were fastening unconsciously. Was it scary? Not at all! She knew there was something bigger than engines and aerodynamic laws. That was her love to Anton, to his sky, his plane, to life itself. She understood the joy she saw in Anton was not just hiding in him, it was living around him everywhere and their love was not just a succession of casual meetings.

For the first time Anton felt that morning he would not be able to live without Katya, without being next to her every day. He would not be able to fly, dream, feel... His only possession – the endless sky he had been dreaming of since his childhood – was gradually disappearing and leaving him face to face with Katya. He knew their

love was special, although it was like a pulsating spring, coming and going, it was as fresh as spring.

Today he saw their happiness being interfered by some other forces leading them apart. For Katya, he thought, an actress career was just a temporary ambition and a background for their fleeting meetings. His passion was the affair he was busy with. It gave him money, let him keep his usual way of life, travel and love Katya... For Anton to stop flying would mean to lose himself. The family life in a full harmony of feelings and peace of mind was not what he had been looking for. There was one more reason for that. It was difficult to see it on the bright background of his heroic profession – he couldn't make a choice in such complicated circumstances. It was not about his everyday work with its direct danger! It was where there were no risks.

For both of them their every meeting was a special occasion. Today it also coincided with the Christmas fireworks of the local administration. Expecting a beautiful spectacle, people were crowding along the shore. Vessels and ships were crowding the bay. They were coming one after another from the left along the small narrow strait like cars driving along a busy road. In the night only the red back lights could be seen. In the sky around the barge where the fireworks were to be set off, small planes were patrolling the sky.

The first volley of the fireworks flashed, the music started over the smooth sea and its enchanting sounds were making their way onto Anton's soul and he could see the past and the future at the same time. He could see the straw field of wheat with cornflowers rustling in the sun. He could hear the leaves of bird cherry rustling. Then the wonderful music was going deeper into his soul and one voice was separating into two to the concealed polyphony of the fugue... Multicoloured spheres were flashing high up the sky. Their twinkling lights were coming

apart like dandelion blowballs, then come together and as two huge universes were dashing apart to the anxious high sounds of violins.

The next day Katya flew away.

6.

The tour in Canada continued. Katya was singing, dancing, changing towns, singing again and only at night, when the narcotic effect of the stage stopped, she was tortured by the same questions and couldn't sleep. Why had they met, being so different? Why were they in love? He was in the sky – she was on the ground. He was on his own, face to face with his stars, she was always with her viewers and fans. Like oppositely charged particles, they accidentally collided and after that no force could separate them. But there was sadness in her soul of their repeated and sort of happy and careless but in fact so hopeless meetings. Will Anton be able to leave the sky? She had always been anxious when they were to part, she wanted to understand what would happen later, how she could live tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. At the end of the tour she had a dream at night of Anton driving a car somewhere and her running after him under pelting rain, all wet through, waving her arms and banging on the car window... Then the car slowed down and stopped running into a tree... She also stopped... The door window didn't open, neither did the door. No one got out of the car... She couldn't see who was inside. She kept standing there until she suddenly realized there was no Anton there. He had died, driven to death!.. Having woken up of her own and sobbing, Katya felt unbearable pain when she understood everything was all over, she would never be able to see him, say what she wanted to say to him... The pain splashed out over the

edge of her soul and was now veiling her eyes with insufferable salty tears and the pain wouldn't go... it was a grateful pain – for Anton had been in her life!

A year had passed after their meeting in Vancouver, then two more and more... She had a son now, she got married, gave up singing, moved to another town... Her complicated feelings for Anton were now being replaced with clear thoughts, and her parents' long-standing reasons in favour of a different life seemed more convincing.

"Many people love rain," Katya would say to herself. "It's splattering on the roof and its pleasant and calming sound makes you think of the future and recollect the past... Is it nice? It must be. But it has never applied to me. In my childhood I couldn't go out in the rain, when I got older it caused troubles again – it ruined my make-up..." Of course, Katya realized the rain nourished the soil and cleaned life. After the rain everyone could blossom, sing and dance. But to stay all the time under the rain? If there was a reason to love the rain it was for it to end sooner or later or turn into the snow.

It was the same thing with Anton, his dark grey eyes looked like rain... It was difficult to leave a person she had been happy with. But every time she parted with him she felt and understood clearly she could face a real loss. What if that fragile and happy world cracked and fell to pieces one day? She wouldn't have a family or children... Then no stage could give her peace of mind.

* * *

When Anton saw Katya in the cafe he quickly turned around and left. His unusual and burning thoughts were oppressing him. Like an Amphibian man, who had once met his love and plunged into a deep, unknown and earthy feeling, Anton couldn't hover in the air and give himself to that magic state of his soul. He had to make a

choice but he was not able to. Or had he already made it? He was walking along the streets of Marbella towards the setting sun rays, looking into passers-by faces. Trying to remember their smiles, gestures and movements. Around him there was a normal life, passers-by were carelessly walking, lovers were cuddling, children were blowing bubbles, jumping and trying to catch the versicoloured balls...

7.

Another year passed. Katya was walking in the park with her son. It was getting dark and when they were leaving it poured down with rain. They heard a tram clank. Escaping the rain, they got through the open doors and took seats on the tram.

An elderly grey-haired man in a coat and a walking stick was sitting in front of them and reading a paper. Katya automatically looked at its pages. In the right bottom of the paper somewhere under the man's hand she saw a black-and-white photo. "Anton! It's his face..." her chest was thumping, everything around her was spinning and disappearing and Katya couldn't understand what was moving - the tram or black silhouettes of people, where she was and where her son was.

She squeezed the child's hand, gently stroked an unruly lock on the top of his head and turned her face away, hiding it. Katya was cuddling her son and in her thoughts she was returning to the happy frosty morning in Vancouver...

The old tram was clanking. The first snow was ripping the last leaves off the tree branches. The wind was carrying them and knocking down rain drops off the window glass.

All at Home!

It was an autumn morning. The waves of the becoming cold sea are running onto the shore, biting it and forcelessly rolling back. A blast of the wind is diluting an astringent scent of fading. In the air there is a cloud of falling leaves... I have got out from under the duvet and stretched. Looks like it is time to get up and go for a walk. It is cloudy today so Boriska will surely choose the short path through the wood. It is fine there, I know a lot of good places to stop, look around and run about. Here is my favourite pine-tree. It has such gentle bark with pink pattern, it seems to smile at me. The bottom of the straight and high trunk is getting dark and covered in wet green moss. It is great to breathe in the fresh air after the rain which has been rattling on the roof all night... The faded grass always rustles there and there is a lot of wet yellow leaves on the ground.

I enjoy walking along the narrow path along the shore in the morning. There are a lot of pine-trees there and there are hardly ever bilberries there. Their bushes are so nasty. If you walk near them, you get wet. I don't like that.

Boris is walking near me and phoning someone. He is busy. He is not in the mood. So I would better run to my favourite place. The bank there bends and forms a small pool with a lot of rich grass and reed mace. Quietly prowling through the trees to the water, I like to scare white swans, who often swim here to have a rest.

I run around along the shore trying to show everyone who the boss is here. Well, at least near my path... The swans are not fussing, they swim aside without waving their wings and are fluctuating in the water. They don't even turn their long necks. Not like ducks. Those would have flown up far away. These ones clang, flap their wings but don't fly away.

Having restored justice, I return home with a sense of performed duty. Boris has already prepared a meal and is carrying the plates to the table. After a long walk on an empty stomach I am always hungry.

I feel cheerful and rush to my meal, leaving Boriska behind. I have to look back all the time to make sure he is carrying my plate and has not eaten my food. So far, so good. The meal starts.

Usually I quickly eat my food and wait for Boriska recollect some doctor's words and leave half of his breakfast uneaten. I wait for that wonderful moment while sitting on the sofa and politely looking the other way. The air smells of boiled meat and buckwheat. Besides, his buckwheat is likely to be salted and poured over with olive oil, which makes it a real treat. The quantity of what Boris has eaten is growing and the buckwheat in the plate is decreasing, unfortunately.

I felt like reminding him of myself. Quietly banging on the table, I start humming something that I know annoys Boris. I know he can't stand it and tells me off for that. The effect is nil! It's tough. I will have to interfere directly. It is actually a sure option but I can only use it in extreme cases. Hooray! I won! I return to the sofa and lie down there comfortably with my head on a big red cushion. Having eaten enough, we watch TV in silence. As usual, there is nothing interesting there – just a noise and picture flickering. It is different when “Seventeen Moments of Spring” or football are on. Boriska groans or yells loudly and I feel something is wrong and get distressed for him. It is the

other way round today. It is full harmony, no emotions. We both gradually doze off.

A little bit later Boris makes a big mug of tea for himself. I get up straight away to check if he is making a cheese sandwich for himself. Or maybe, even a sausage sandwich! There is quite a lot of tea... Surely he is not going to drink it without anything else. No, I was wrong this time. Well, it is worse for him. With a sandwich it would have been much tastier.

He surprises me all the time. He knows that if his tea is with sugar, he needs a cheese sandwich. The tea was sweet, I saw it. Where is a sandwich? What would have happened if he had made a sandwich? Let me dream. Would he have given me half of it? No way! He would have stuffed all of it into his mouth and then be chewing it for a long time, washing down with tea. I know him! He doesn't like to share. He is either greedy or loves his food. I still have not made up my mind about him. I am studying him and comparing him to other people. I need to know it in order to apply effective sanctions to my elder relative.

In general, Boriska is nice and I love him. I love it when he takes me for a ride in his car. Usually I sit next to him and when he gets out I take his seat at the wheel. Passers-by look at me and are surprised that someone as small as me can drive. Sometimes I would wake up, throw the blanket off, open my eyes and through the huge window see the green lawn where I usually play, light leaves of a birch-tree on the background of always dark fir-trees... And Boriska would stroke me, put the blanket on my body and head and he would sleep again. I usually sigh deeply. There is so much sadness in my sigh that Boris would stroke me again. It is nice when all are at home! But this happiness will end up sooner or later...

When he goes somewhere I want him to come back soon. Then I would wait for him and don't want to miss

him coming back. I would lie on the grass and watch the gates for hours. Or I would go to a big bolder stone near the house. When my heart is heavy, I am always there. I would lie down and stay there in the warmth and calm. The bolder stone affects me this way. It has been there for a long time. Many-many years! Since before I was born. Sometimes I lie there for long. Then the bolder stone gives up and I can hear it whispering quietly, "Don't fla-a-a-ash before my eyes...!" If it is late and time to go to bed I will go inside of course but I would still stay near the door for half an hour with my head down and wait. What if... It is a big difference to sleep on my own on the sofa in nan's room or on the big bed with Boriska.

Yesterday they brought my younger relative for my jubilee. He was small, white, with dark round eyes. Looked like a bunny. Ran like a bunny. I was shouting at him to show him who the boss was but he didn't run away, he was just running around me. He thought he was clever. He must have known I wouldn't be able to catch him. He was probably clever, but also very naughty. He has ripped all my toys that were lying around in the lawn. He had sharp and itchy teeth so he was grabbing everything he could, especially precious things. He has chewed Boriska's phone, TV remote and his favourite slippers. I remember I used to bring those slippers to Boriska but that little monkey!..

However, I taught him who the boss of the house was. When Boris brought something nice to eat in, that little relative of mine wouldn't even come up to him and pretend he didn't need anything. Of course – I was near him! I would have taken the food from him in the nick of the moment! It was a different story if I was far from him, on the sofa near Boris, for instance. Every day would be Sunday for him! He would drag the treat away, dig a hole in the garden, put it there (how could he do that?), after that he would put the soil back and return inside as if nothing

had happened. But his nose would be covered in soil. Not very clever! I can see everything, make conclusions, then keep a close watch on him and his activity and actions. Mind you, the words "activity" and "action", as a Muller said on TV, mean the same thing.

The newcomer has two peculiarities. I can't do anything about it. In winter he can always find under the snow all the toys that were left in the lawn. Must be by their smell. Boris would shout, "Where is our duck?" Fancy saying "our"! And he would find it straight away. He can even find the frog. The toy is so small but he can find it. He would get it from under the snow and run through the drift. And wouldn't even sink into the snow. I can't smell the toys like he does – I just remember what is where. But he is like a hunter for... strangers' belongings. He would run out with my duck onto the path in the snow, stand still and want others to admire him. "See how clever and bright I am!" Only a cap on the top of his head and trousers with suspenders are missing. He can't even bark properly. He just keeps quiet pretending to like to be thinking. Sometimes when Boriska clears the snow or leaves in autumn, he goes absolutely mad. He throws himself on the shovel or rake, squeaks, shrieks, mews like a cat, but he can't bark. He must like the way the rake moves back and forth or he lacks iron in his body so when he catches it he starts licking it like mad. Sometimes he would sit near the door for an hour without making a single sound. Even in winter! Some hero!

And now about the main thing. The bed I sleep on with Boriska is rather high but I am still able to climb it. I do struggle and can climb it only from the right side. So the cheeky monkey would jump on it first, sit in my place and wouldn't turn a hair. No, he wouldn't. He tried to demonstrate the natural process of the shift in power. I would come and go, squeak to Boriska to make him move the idler from my space. Nothing helps! One of them is

already asleep, the other is in the seventh heaven. Now I can't jump on the bed at all. If I could, he would be whining and begging me to forgive him.

Anyway, after having enjoyed his greatness, he would slowly and unwillingly, doing a big favour, climb over Boris to the left side of the bed and vacate my space. That means he does realize how to behave even though he is naughty! That cheers me up and makes me tolerate his tricks, get used to him. I would even say I start to kind of love him.

At last I climb on the bed and lie at Boriska's feet on the duvet. I sigh loudly of pleasure. The little one gets embarrassed, lowers his head and reaches me to lick. As if I need it! I would rather him not follow us when I go for a walk with Boris. He hangs about all the time. If it goes this way he will get as far as the swans soon. Even I have never barked at them yet.

Chapter One

Stirring his coffee, the Writer was looking out of the window. The narrow pond with hanging thickets of stinging nettle and sedge was gradually turning into a wide shapeless reservoir surrounded with burdock and thistle. Among the green there was rich bright blue iris. It reminded him of Van Gogh, impressionists and delighted his eye. The Writer would squint his eyes, even though the sunlight didn't dazzle him, and sink into his thoughts. A drop of brown liquid was inevitably dripping down the cup wall. The teaspoon was clinking something in a different rhythm to his hand's. The Writer was dreaming.

He was dreaming of the same thing all the time.

After breakfast, without taking a shower, he would hold his hands – exactly like Van Cliburn – over the typewriter, and after a long pause the words “What shall I write about?” would invariably appear on the clean sheet of paper. He wanted to speckle the new text with trendy oxymorons, polysyndetons, pleasing the Writer's heart, allusions and reminiscences...

The Woman who made his coffee and shared the Writer's home, would put her hands on his shoulders, kiss the top of his head and try to console him saying, “It's alright, it's alright!” He would raise his head, hold her hand, squeeze it in his and looked at her guiltily. She would say, “It's alright” again, blow him a kiss and disappear. He would stay on his own, sit in the arm-chair

and, his body half turned, watch the light wind swing the curtains in the open window.

Hanging about the rooms, the Writer sometimes came across a pile of papers lying at the front door. The papers were put there by the Woman who found them every day in the letter-box but was not interested in news. The Writer liked to pull out one paper from the pile, open it, turn over pages without reading them. Black-and-white paper pages were gradually covering his desk. Then he would throw them off the desk and give a deep sigh. His hands would be dirty in print. Some time ago the Writer published a novel or, let's say, a long-long story. He could remember the moments it was born very well. Then, in a spasm of creativity, he was grabbing any pieces of paper, old newspapers, envelopes and quickly transferred to the paper thoughts that suddenly appeared, in small handwriting. The Woman would carefully cut the Writer's creations out and glue them on sheets of paper. She was amused but the Writer didn't care about his work. He was writing because he felt like it. It resulted in something filled with events. They were intertwining, like snakes in a hole, and creating an intrigue, engaging a reader.

A decent magazine published the story by instalments in its last pages. The editor's office was not overcrowded with delighted letters from its readers but a company dealing in public opinion research announced that the story "was liked". The elderly balding editor shook the Writer's hand enthusiastically, "We are full for the next two quarters but after that we would be glad to publish something else!" The Writer was as happy as a child. "They are reading my prose, they like it and want more of it!"

Now he had to write a new book. He knew it would be around three hundred pages long and he knew what the epigraph would be. Even two! The title was cropping up. Something similar to "Les neiges d'antan" ("Snows of yesteryear") by François Villon.

So his morning would start with breakfast followed by sitting at the desk and spending a long time at the typewriter. Its ribbon sometimes got stuck at shifts. "What shall I write about?" There was only a week to the end of the quarter and the Writer was about to understand he would never write anything and he was not a writer at all, he was just an idiot who had been lucky because he had got an inspiration, his tightly sleeping talent had woken up for a moment and he had hit the jackpot. But that was it! In those minutes the Writer really wanted the novel to have been ordered not by some lousy editor but someone in a black cloak and a hat drawn over his eyes, like "Requiem" was ordered to Mozart. Then the work would certainly be going smoothly. What emotions would have been at the start of his work!

But his illusions were disappearing fast and he said to himself, "Enough! This way I won't be able to write anything. I need to experience it. When it goes, it goes. No need to get stressed over it. I will call the editor and tell him there is nothing to publish and I will live my life the same way. Or even better - I will tell him I have written a lot but don't want to publish anything as the readers are not ready yet!" The Woman naively thought she was supporting the Writer when she was saying, "You can do it!" even though she didn't know if he could. He would ask her, "Do you think so?" and she would confidently nod her head and made a sound similar to grunting. That was the sound grandmas normally do when knitting and answering their grand-children's questions.

The rubbish bin under the desk had been filled with a pile of crumpled pieces of paper and the Woman understood the work was going amiss. She was really surprised and alerted by the fact that the Writer had got special paper with water marks and a set of fountain pens from an expensive shop. That had not happened before. It had been her who had glued the extracts to-

gether into a piece of writing. Later on she had to get used to the typewriter's noise. Well, even that was in the past now. Soon the pens disappeared somewhere in the desk drawers.

By lunchtime the Woman used to have come back from work and cook food which the Writer would swallow in a state of deep depression. She would say something usual and everyday, like the railway rumbling behind the woods. She would disappear quietly and leave the Writer on his own, feeling empty, even though he had had lunch, and realizing that was that and he had just to admit it. He had to return to his old work which had suited him before and which he had been happy with. There, in the town council account department, there were always people around, they were always counting something, everyone was counting their own thing, now and again they would lift their heads and give a smile to the world... And every moment of the work day was filled with completely understandable activities. All their "creation work" was to reflect the existing reality in time, fully and truthfully. It was similar to writers' work, but they had to do it in figures put in the vertical and horizontal columns of the balance sheet.

The Writer could feel that metamorphosis and was proud of having been representing reality for a long time. Nevertheless, any memoirs of those years were torturing him. The endless rows of digits would stand in front of his eyes and suppress him.

That was what the Writer found very difficult. He would be walking around the house for hours with his feet in dirty beige slippers with worn-out heels. When he passed by the book shelves, he would touch the backs of beautifully bound books, wipe his dusty finger on his robe and turn the telly on several times. Sitting on the sofa with a back cushion slid down, he would bend his head to one side and squint at the screen. In a stream of

words, phrases and dialogues coming from the virtual electronic world, the Writer was looking for a hint.

"Damn, what shall I write about?" the Writer was pulling his robe belt. "It's silly! Why did I decide I even could write? I managed to once, but that doesn't mean anything... It's possible to do many things just once. Usually only sad sacks can succeed the first time... There are good grounds for saying newcomers are lucky in the casino."

The clock in the lounge was striking every half an hour and the air outside was getting grey indicating the day was coming to its end and it was going out of the window. "There are three hundred and sixty five days in a year, well, sometimes three hundred and sixty six. If you live for seventy years it is only twenty five thousand days and a little more. How many days have I been sitting like this?" This conclusion would give the Writer a fever. He would go to the bathroom to wash his face with cold water and look in the cloudy mirror. His experiences would get dull and his common sense would wake up again. "Carpe diem, carpe diem! Wise men!" he would get distressed. "How can I catch the day? What can I catch? There are lots of them, I don't have to catch them!"

He heard a noise in the front door. It was eight o'clock. It would take some time to have dinner and his thoughts wouldn't be so heavy. After dinner the Woman rattled the dishes in the kitchen. The Writer sat at the table scrubbing the bottom of the yoghurt pot.

"How is our novel? Is it progressing?" the Woman deafened him. She was wiping the table. The Writer sighed, placed his palms on the edge of the table, like a pianist who had just closed the grand piano with unalive keyboard waiting for their notes, and murmured something. The Woman continued wiping the table. Deep down in his heart the Writer blamed her for being so heartless. "Why is she doing it so energetically?" He wanted her to stroke

his head and whisper something like, "You are probably ill. Why don't you return to your old work?"

Sometimes, especially after a light dinner, the Writer would go out into town to walk, to pop into a bar and have a beer and to watch the merry visitors. He was dazzled with their relationship easiness and the sincerity of their feelings. He would be so much more inspired with the careless spirit of the bar that coming home he would be waltzing and exclaiming, "When I have a drink, especially on an empty stomach, my head is full of ideas!"

"Why don't you write them down?" the Woman was surprised. The Writer would shrug his shoulders and lie on the sofa. He was happy with himself and his inspiration and he believed the next day it would flow out on the paper as a prose masterpiece. But soon he would be in the arms of Morpheus and the Woman would gently cover him with a blanket.

The next day would be the same as before: coffee, a brown shapeless stain on the desk, a rattling teaspoon, newspaper rustling and his own hateful face over the sink. "I can't live like this any more," the Writer said once. "Is one painting enough to be called an artist? Is one sonata enough to be called a composer? I have written just one small novel but I have done it with love and I was pleased with it and enjoyed writing it. At the end of the day, Alain Fournier has written just one novel! What about Griboyedov?" Suddenly it started raining. The office window turned into a "crying" face of the Writer in despair. "This is because one of them was killed at the front and the other one died doing his duty... What about me? I am alive..." the Writer thought but he could remember only his happy childhood years. A strong wind is playing with the tops of elm-trees, spinning a weather vane and he is running with his arm high up in the air and a kite tied to it, running as far as he can in front of all the local children. Being short of breath, he stops

and looks up... There is nothing in the sky. Apart from a caravan of freckled clouds and a rainbow from the sweat drops on his eyelashes.

"My God!" the Writer thought. "What if I have already said everything I could? What if I have already got my part of happiness? If I have, what is the meaning of life? What shall I do now?"

Suddenly he felt a lump in his throat and thousands of tears were staying in his eyes and not rolling down his face. The Writer went into the bathroom where there was a medicine box, took the contents of a small jar with red exclamation marks on the label and swallowed them with difficulty washing them down with tap water. In the mirror he could see someone in tears and shaggy. Nothing happened. But then it became much easier – as it used to be when he decided to stick his typewriter behind the wardrobe, get his accounting briefcase ready and polish his boots.

He went back to the room, brightened-up and light. He stood near the window with a view of the pond. A blue flower had fallen and instead of it there was a strange fruit looking like a comic minstrel's hat with jingle-bells. It had just stopped raining and in the drops sticking around sedge, there shone thousands of small suns.

The Woman came home late at night, took her coat off and entered the Writer's office.

He was sitting in his work place with his head dropped and his eyes closed. On the floor there lay desk drawers. In the middle of the desk she saw a white sheet of posh paper with water signs and on it it had been written in an ink pen, "Chapter One".

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